OLD!

12-PAGE SONIC SPECTACULAR

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES

retro* GAMER™

30th ANNIVERSARY

30 YEARS OF

SONIC

THE HEDGEHOG

SONIC TEAM BOSS TAKASHI IIZUKA EXPLAINS THE SECRETS OF SEGA'S SPEEDY SUPERSTAR

FUTURE
LOAD 221

GAMEBOY POCKET
BRAND NEW IPS-READY SHELLS

The Game Boy pocket has always been one of my favourite consoles. It was rarely seen in the UK and mostly popular in Japan, but there is something about the original console in a smaller form-factor that made it appealing to me.

The beauty of having a gaming company, and the ability to 3D model, mould and mass produce is I could finally make myself a brand new shell for the Pocket, along with better quality plastic than the original, pre-moulded to fit the new IPS screens in without having to cut the windows and walls to bits, and in some awesome colours of my choosing.

One of my favourites films of all time is Jurassic Park... so you can guess what colour shell was first to be made? That's right, our unique amber colour shells. I personally love them, and they have been a big seller.

As well as the shells, we obviously finished the job by making buttons, rubbers, glass screens, and offering all the required parts and tools to fully restore your Game Boy Pocket to better than original!

As well as Game Boys we also stock almost every other retro console (as well as some modern consoles) on our site.

Luke, RetroSix Team

^ CUSTOM PRINTED ARTWORK

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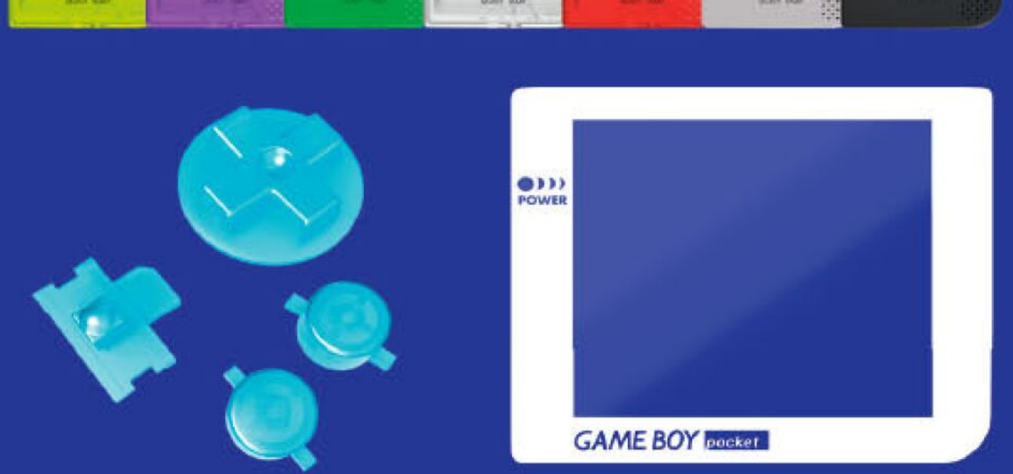
SPARES & REPAIRS



retrosix

RetroSix is a small team of people who have been in the gaming industry and retail business since 2013, and sold consoles, controllers and even designed our own controllers and consoles.

Putting that expertise to good use, we decided to start RetroSix; a small team of people passionate about retro gaming, and restoring original consoles to like-new, adding our own twist and style to them and in general bringing a modern twist to retro.

LOADING...

It feels like only yesterday that I saw Sonic tearing his way through Green Hill Zone at a speed that made my head spin. Astonishingly that first brush with Sega's blue blur was actually 30 years ago and now I've made myself rather sad.

If you're a fan of Sega's mascot you certainly won't feel sad about this latest issue because we've pulled out all the stops to ensure that the speedy superstar gets the anniversary celebration he deserves. Sonic Team's boss, Takashi Iizuka chats to us about the defining aspects that have made Sonic the star he is today and we've also got an incredible 32-page mini magazine that includes 40 of his best and most interesting games. Nick's even written a My Retro Life on how the spiky star has shaped his life. I didn't even know he was a fan!

If blue hedgehogs aren't your thing, there's still plenty of other great articles to get stuck into, including a look at the *Spy Vs Spy* series, the glorious Nineties-themed *Battle Axe* and an article on the Pico-8, a virtual console that emulates the retro aesthetic of old. Oh, and if you need a new game pad make sure you check out our subs offer on page 30.

Stay safe and enjoy the magazine

THE RETROBATES

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SONIC MEMORY?

DARRAN JONES

Constantly trying to catch Nick out by making him admit that *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is actually Sonic's best game.
Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls, a SNES-loving cousin and an award-winning magazine, all under one roof!
Currently playing: *Hollow Knight*
Favorite game of all time: *Strider*

TIM EMPEY

Playing *Sonic 3*, getting to that barrel, getting stuck, flying into a rage, mashing all the buttons and accidently figuring it out.
Expertise: Finishing Game Pass games before they leave the service
Currently playing: *Marvel Puzzle Quest*
Favourite game of all time: *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*

NICK THORPE

Sitting down and watching Buckaroo play the *Sonic 1* prototype recently, and realising that the rush of excitement I felt would be shared by so many of my friends.
Expertise: Owning five Master Systems and a Mark III
Currently playing: *Yakuza*
Favourite game of all time: *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*

ANDY SALTER

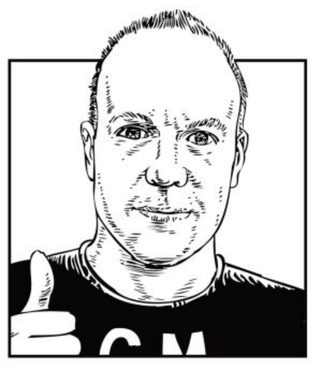
Sonic The Hedgehog was one of the games that came with my Mega Drive, but I think that the animated into of *Sonic CD* is my favourite *Sonic* memory.
Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently playing: *M&B2: Bannerlord...* Modded of course
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War*

ASHLEY DAY

Working in GameStation when *Sonic Adventure 2* released on Dreamcast, and blasting out the tenth anniversary CD that came with the import release, on the shop stereo all day.
Expertise: Buying MSX games like they're going out of fashion
Currently playing: *The Maze Of Galious*
Favourite game of all time: *Shining Force III*

PAUL DRURY

Going halves with my girlfriend at the time on *Sonic & Knuckles* on the day it came out. The relationship didn't last but I got custody of the cartridge
Expertise: Giraffes in videogames
Currently playing: *Circus Convoy*
Favourite game of all time: *Sheep In Space*



GRAEME MASON

Sonic The Hedgehog was the first game I played when I got my Mega Drive back in the early Nineties. After almost a decade of playing ZX Spectrum games, it was just an amazing experience I'll never forget.
Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: *Resident Evil Village*
Favourite game of all time: *Resident Evil IV*

RORY MILNE

I remember *Sonic 2*'s two-player co-op mode being a go-to at Nineties' games nights. Tails was always falling behind, but after a few cold beers that became part of the fun.
Expertise: The game that I'm writing about at the time of writing
Currently playing: *Pyjamarama*
Favourite game of all time: *Tempest*

JOHN SZCZEPANIAK

Growing up in South Africa the Saturday morning kids TV had a phone-in competition where lucky callers 'played' *Sonic* by shouting instructions as they watched their TV. Coolest thing ever!
Expertise: Everything Japanese and anything obscure
Currently playing: *Take the Bullet* (Dreamcast)
Favourite game of all time: *Cave Story*

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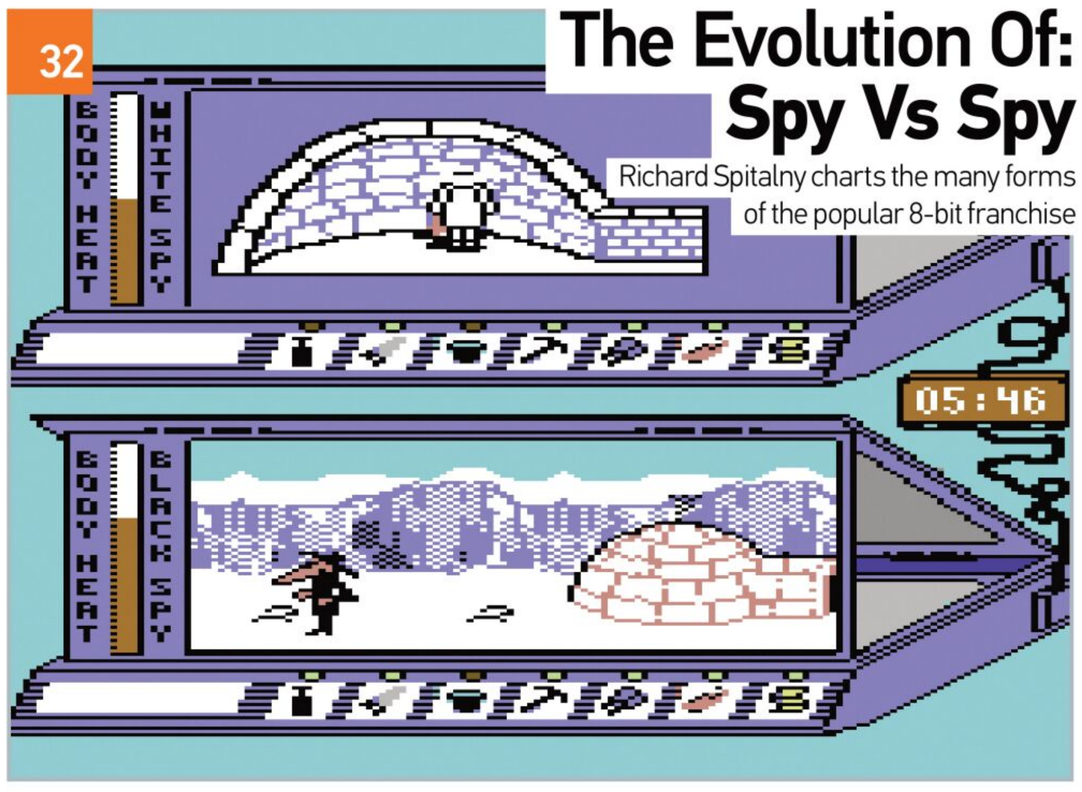
Endless Runner: Sonic The Hedgehog's 30th Anniversary

Takashi Iizuka, the head of Sonic Team explains the many reasons why Sega's mascot has struck a chord with gamers for three whole decades



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The Evolution Of: Spy Vs Spy

Richard Spitalny charts the many forms of the popular 8-bit franchise

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Retro Inspired: Battle Axe

Henk Nieborg and Mike Tucker explain the influences behind their tribute to classic Nineties action games

The Making Of: Shantae

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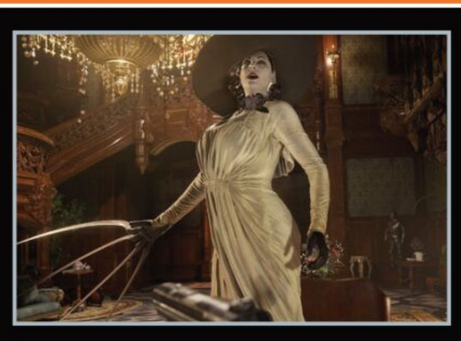

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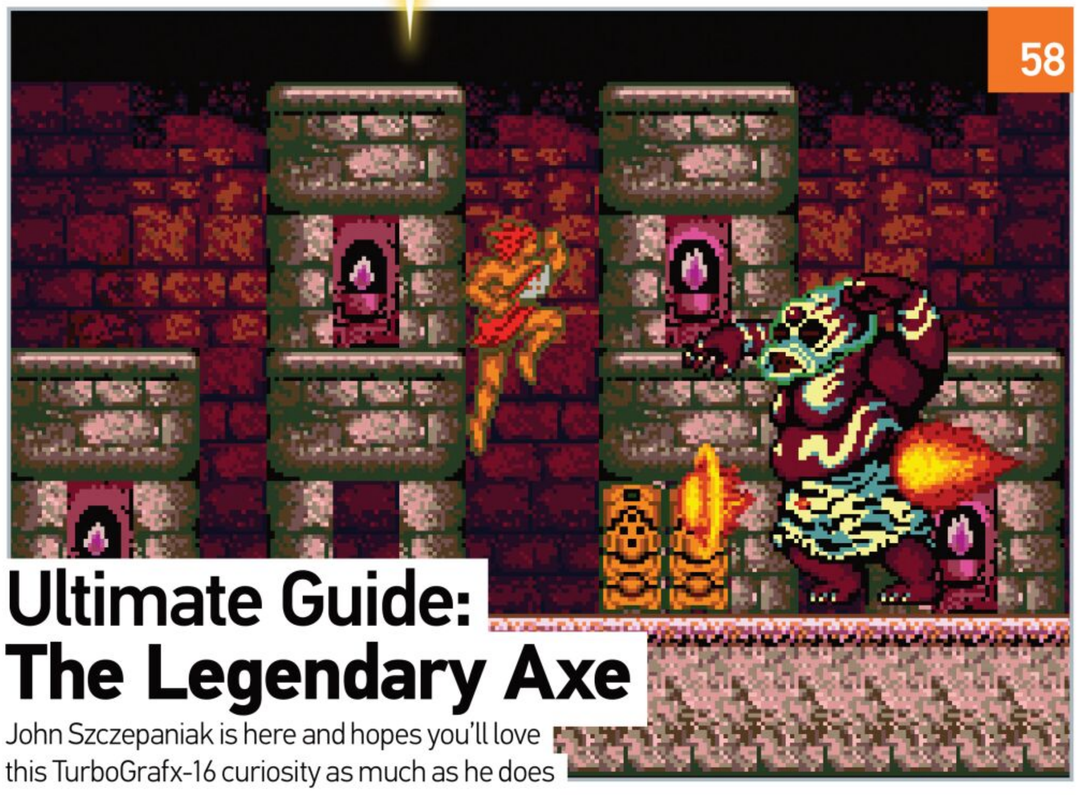
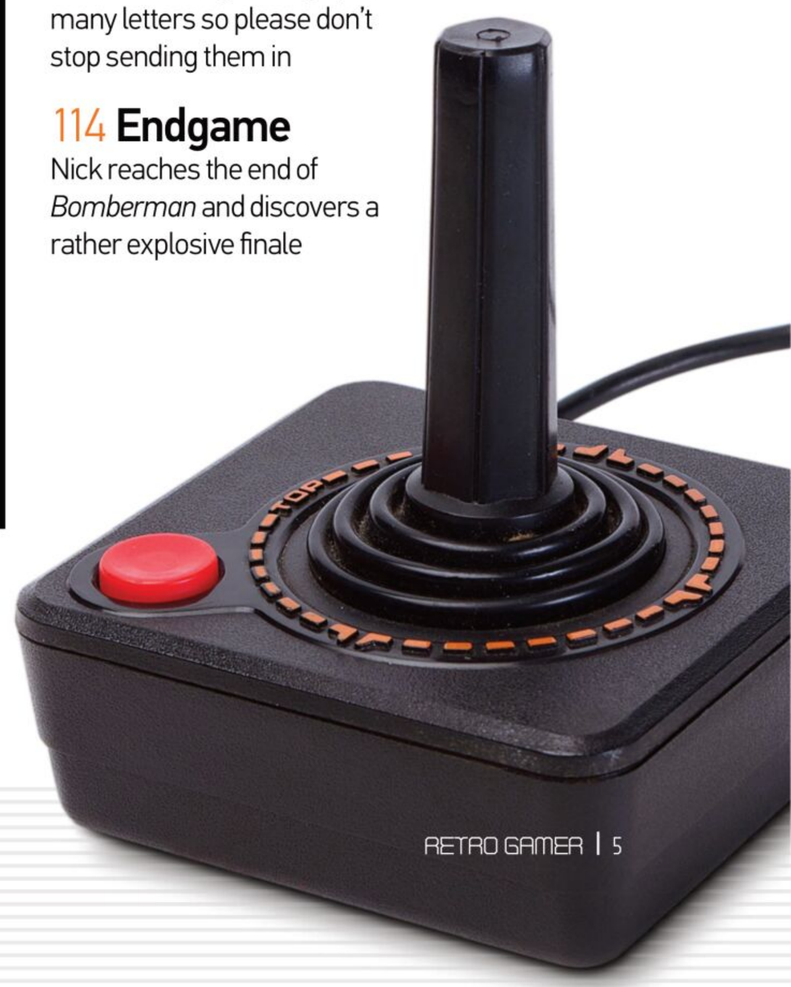


Ultimate Guide: The Legendary Axe

John Szczepaniak is here and hopes you'll love this TurboGrafx-16 curiosity as much as he does



» Josh plans to let others use the Carbon Engine, but it will take a while. "We don't currently have the support bandwidth to handle helping developers just yet."

CARBON TESTING

Josh Fairhurst and Dimitris Giannakis on creating a new retro engine for Switch

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12 A MOMENT WITH
Paul Drury quizzes David Crane and the Kitchen brothers about their new studio, Audacity Games

14 BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES
The E3 hype is long over, but Nick is still finding things to get excited about as he travels back to August 2004

Limited Run Games started off by selling physical PS Vita releases of its own games, before expanding to other developers as well as other systems like the PS4, Switch and even the odd Sega CD release. After testing the waters with several revered LucasArts IPs, including *Monkey Island* and *Star Wars*, the publisher has now started to release numerous Game Boy titles and has even created a brand-new engine that lets you play emulated Game Boy games on the Switch. The first Switch release is WayForward's *Shantae*, but cofounder of Limited Run Games, Josh Fairhurst hopes that more releases are on the way.

One of the key factors of the new engine is the collaboration between Limited Run's engineer, Joe Modzeleski and Dimitris Giannakis who is better known as Youtube's Modern Vintage Gamer. "Joe had seen a lot of Dimitris' videos on YouTube and had found one where Dimitris had ported the original *Diablo* to Switch for fun in his spare time," says Josh. "This impressed us and it was clear that Dimitris would be the perfect person to help us with our Carbon Engine."

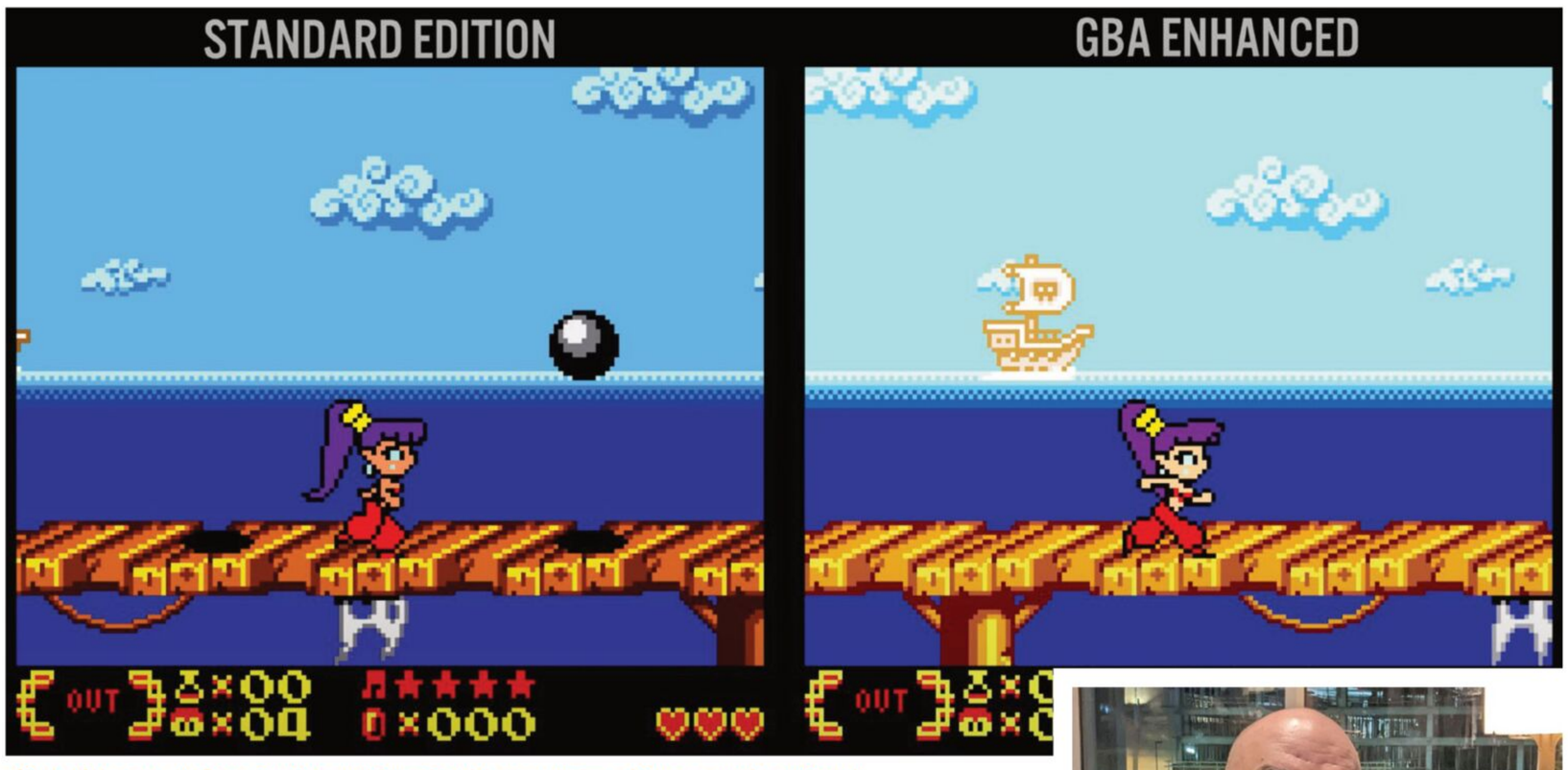
Dimitris agreed to the project and began working with Joe and the pair began making good progress. "Development took over twelve months, with two people involved," confirms Dimitris. "I handled the coding, with Joe providing direction on the engine and what features we'd need. He would often playtest and we'd compare the engine to real hardware to determine how large the deltas were with respect to things such as input latency, audio quality and overall user experience."

Josh feels this playtesting was crucial in order to emulate the classic systems and puts a lot of it down to Joe's diligence during testing. "Joe is very sensitive to input lag," Josh continues, "so he would test a variety of games in the engine to ensure that everything was as solid as it possibly could be. Joe also worked on a lot of the front-end features."

But why call it the Carbon Engine? To us it sounds like something that's dated, but Dimitris looks at it in a different way. "I chose the name Carbon because in engineering, carbon fibre polymers are lightweight but also can be stronger than steel," he tells us. "This is what I wanted the emulation to be – simple but could handle itself as a commercial product. The name caught on and pretty soon Josh and the leadership team at LRG began calling it the Carbon Engine."

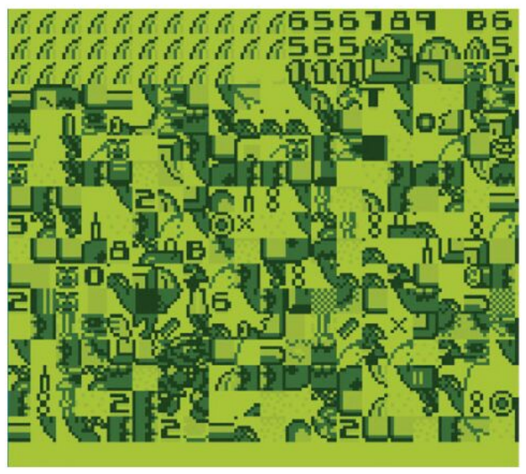
Another strength of the engine that Dimitris and Joe have created is its flexibility which allows Limited Run to emulate the Game Boy Colour and Game Boy Advance as well as Nintendo's original 1989 console.

» According to Josh it's a lot trickier licensing old games compared to new ones. "A lot of older games have changed ownership several times over the years."



» [Switch] Here are the Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance versions of *Shantae* running on Switch.

» [Switch] "One of the milestones was getting *Super Mario Land 2* running," Dimitris tells us. "This was to apply the Game Boy Color palette if it was running in that mode."



» [Switch] Here's another early test of the engine where the team were trying numerous things, including implementing background and sprite tiles.

"There's a huge library of games for these platforms that I would personally love to see come to modern consoles," admits Josh. "To be honest, though, we initially targeted these platforms because we really wanted to re-release *Shantae*."

You can read about the creation of WayForward's inventive platformer on page 72. It's a great little game and now insanely expensive, so we were interested to know why Josh was so keen to emulate it for Switch users. "It felt very weird to me that four out of five *Shantae* games were playable on Switch, but the first one was not," he admits. "I felt a calling to try and help fill in that gap. *Shantae* is also a notoriously hard to emulate game, so we figured if we could support that – we'd easily support everything else!"

With that focus in mind Joe and Dimitris got to work and had more than a few bumps along the road to success. "The Game Boy is a fairly simple system to get up and running but there are many scenarios that can be problematic," admits Dimitris. "The biggest issues were correctly implementing the CPU and PPU timings. Ensuring your timings and when to fire interrupts is extremely important otherwise games will show unexpected results, crash or in the worst case, simply not run. There also is added complexity with mappers and bank switching as many GB/GBC carts are many times larger than what is available in the hardware RAM space. Fortunately the Game Boy emulation community is one of the very best, with excellent documentation – so most of the time I wasn't stuck on any one problem for too long."

It's worth noting that the emulator is only going to be used on modern releases and won't be used for the numerous classic Game Boy carts that the company is now re-releasing. "Our republished Game Boy titles that run on original hardware use the original ROMs, though the ROMs are freshly dumped from cartridges for our releases and modified to fix outdated publisher screens or legal text," explains Josh. With games like *Shantae* now costing hundreds, we were keen to know if the publisher was specifically targeting the pricier games that are now out of reach of many gamers. "Absolutely," confirms Josh. "More than any other console, it's extremely hard to find a lot of Game Boy games in boxed condition with manuals. I think it is really important for us to provide routes to our partners to bring whatever Game Boy games they have in their libraries back in the form of original cartridges and modern ports with the Carbon Engine."

» Dimitris Giannakis has worked on the Carbon Engine for over a year with Joe Modzeleski.

» Josh Fairhurst cofounded Limited Run Games and is a big collector of classic games. His collection is in issue 202.

While Limited Run's focus has largely been on Nintendo games, we hope that it will turn its attention to systems like the Mega Drive and Game Gear, particularly as it has already dipped its toes in those waters with the Sega CD. "We would certainly consider them if the right titles come along," concludes Josh. "We might even have something for the Genesis/Mega Drive coming soon…" *

ZOMBIES RESURRECTED

If you enjoyed issue 217's *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* Ultimate Guide, you'll probably be happy to hear that the game is being remastered by Dotemu for all modern home systems. Even better, its obscure sequel, *Ghoul Patrol* is also being released. Physical editions are coming courtesy of Limited Run Games, so hopefully we'll get SNES/Mega Drive cart releases as well, because *Ghoul Patrol* is super expensive now.

ONE HOT POTATO

Super Potato is widely considered to be one of the best retro shops if you're planning a trip to Japan. It's now even easier to visit the fabled store as it has recently opened up a shop on eBay, making it easier to see why the store is so popular. It's not super cheap and there will be import charges, but at least it's now easier to get your hands on items from the legendary Japanese store.

Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. Join him as he hosts a phone-in show and plays games at www.twitch.tv/iainlee and also check out www.patreon.com/iainlee.

Just the two of us

Something amazing has happened. The PERFECT game for me and my nine-year-old son has been released. I'd seen loads of people on Twitch playing the co-op puzzle platformer *It Takes Two*. It looked kind of cool but I had no reason to go anywhere near it. It wasn't really my cup of tea – a cutesy two-player puzzler? I was just rediscovering *Command & Conquer* and was keen to dive into that! Then a few days ago, my youngest (let's call him Jim) asked if we could get *It Takes Two*. I agreed but suspected like a lot of the games he asked me to buy, it wouldn't last too long, and he'd be back to *Fortnite* soon enough.

We sat down on the floor together and started it. The story of a girl upset that her parents are splitting up is beautifully handled and allowed me and Jim to chat about how he was feeling several years after I'd divorced his mum. Nothing too heavy, just a light little check in. He's doing well with it, thanks for asking. Then the game itself began and we were swamped with actual magic. I am rubbish at these games and of course, my boy is extremely gifted. That's just the natural order of things. He patiently waited for me at the end of the jumping sections, and we were both filled with pride when he solved all the puzzles. Every single one. I just ran around like a headless divvy not having a Scooby.

And we laughed. Ah man, we were in actual hysterics. It was just so beautiful. I have never been this involved playing a videogame with my kids. It was so, what's the word, intimate! It was intimate. We made memories that afternoon and every day since my boy has phoned me up and asks when he can come over and play it some more.

I never played videogames with my dad. I've been thinking for the past week, struggling to almost manufacture a memory of me and him hunched over the BBC or in an arcade playing together and I can't think of one. I remember him giving me change to see how high I could get in *Donkey Kong* or handing over a cassette for the Dragon 32, but I don't think he ever sat beside me offering suggestions or asking what I was doing. I'd have loved that. I couldn't even ask him to join me because… what would have been the point? He'd have said no, or next week and of course next week never came.

My dad was a good man, but he was flawed, and he was from a different era. That's not a criticism, that's just the way it was. So when my boy asked me to sit and play with him I happily put down whatever stupid grown-up thing I was doing and set aside the next few hours, just for us. The two of us. *

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

IF I HAD SOMEWHERE TO LIVE...

I COULD GO ANYWHERE IN LIFE

When Abi's mum died, life got tough. She didn't get on with her dad and the arguments became violent. Abi felt her only choice was to leave home. With just the clothes on her back, and no idea where to go, she ended up sleeping on the streets in the freezing cold.

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Take it easy

I've never been one of those gamers who enjoys a challenge. I get that for a certain section of the gaming audience, it's all about besting things on their highest difficulty setting. I know there's this tragic mentality with some people that you're not a proper gamer unless you can 'git gud'.

This is, of course, absurd. Completing a difficult game is only an achievement on a personal level. It's not something that you should ever boast about in polite company. I've lost count of the number of games I've failed to complete, because I hit a section where I descended into a sort of *Groundhog Day* hell-loop. Even when I was a kid, there were other things I preferred to be doing over repeating the same section again and again and again.

I mean, how many of us ever completed *Manic Miner*? Be honest. We only know what those later levels look like because we've cheated, or seen them printed in magazines. And don't get me started on *Jet Set Willy* – a game you literally couldn't complete initially, because of bugs.

For me, I want a balance. I want to feel like I'm progressing, even if it's in increments, and not feel like I'm just repeating myself, waiting for that one playthrough where I get lucky. I guess I just never enjoyed the feeling that games were working against me. It wound me up. It angered me. It felt like the creators were laughing at me. Nintendo, right from its earliest days, always understood this. *Super Mario World* had a spectacular sense of place, and just the right amount of difficulty. It felt like Miyamoto was on my side, willing me to win.

On at least two occasions, in my more emotionally volatile youth, I lost my temper with a game. I remember both these occasions well, because they taught me to take a deep breath before reacting.

To wit: I threw my *Donkey Kong* Game & Watch across the living room, on something like my 20th attempt to reach the top of the top screen. It broke. I later told my mother I'd dropped it down the stairs. She didn't believe me. I was ashamed.

And then, years later, I punched a sofa after my umpteenth attempt at scaling the Jawa Sandcrawler in *Super Star Wars*. I somehow missed the cushions, and connected with the wooden frame, ending up with a badly bruised hand. I don't tend to have such outbursts anymore, and a big part of that is because I stay away from games that I know have it in for me. I have absolutely no interest in *Dark Souls*.

Aside from anything, what originally drew me to games was the feeling of exploration. If I go on holiday – remember when we used to have those? – I want the journey and experience to be as smooth and as painless as possible. I don't want obstacles thrown in my path. Give me a nice hotel room with good road access over climbing mountains and sleeping in a tent with a rock as a pillow.

My idea of a great gaming experience has always been the offer of an endless horizon. New experiences. Limitless possibilities. Not roadblocks and locked doors.

> "I punched a sofa after my umpteenth attempt at scaling the Jawa Sandcrawler in Super Star Wars"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

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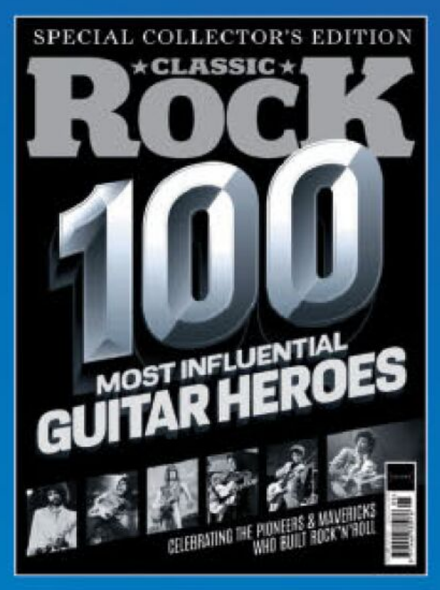

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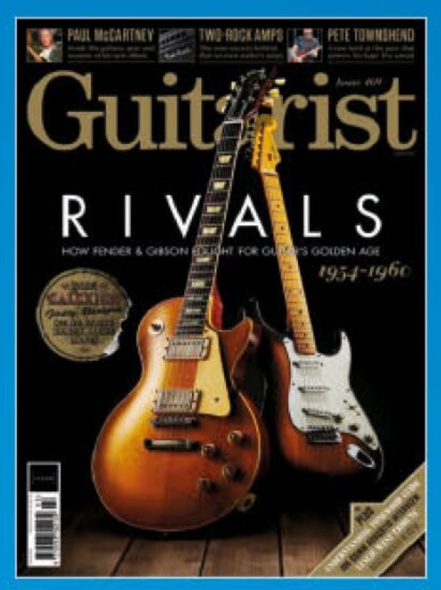

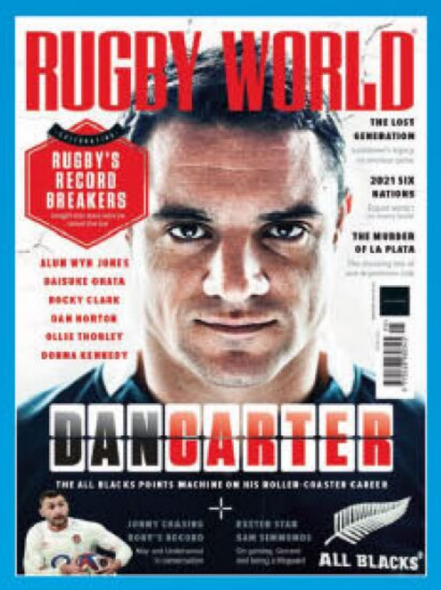

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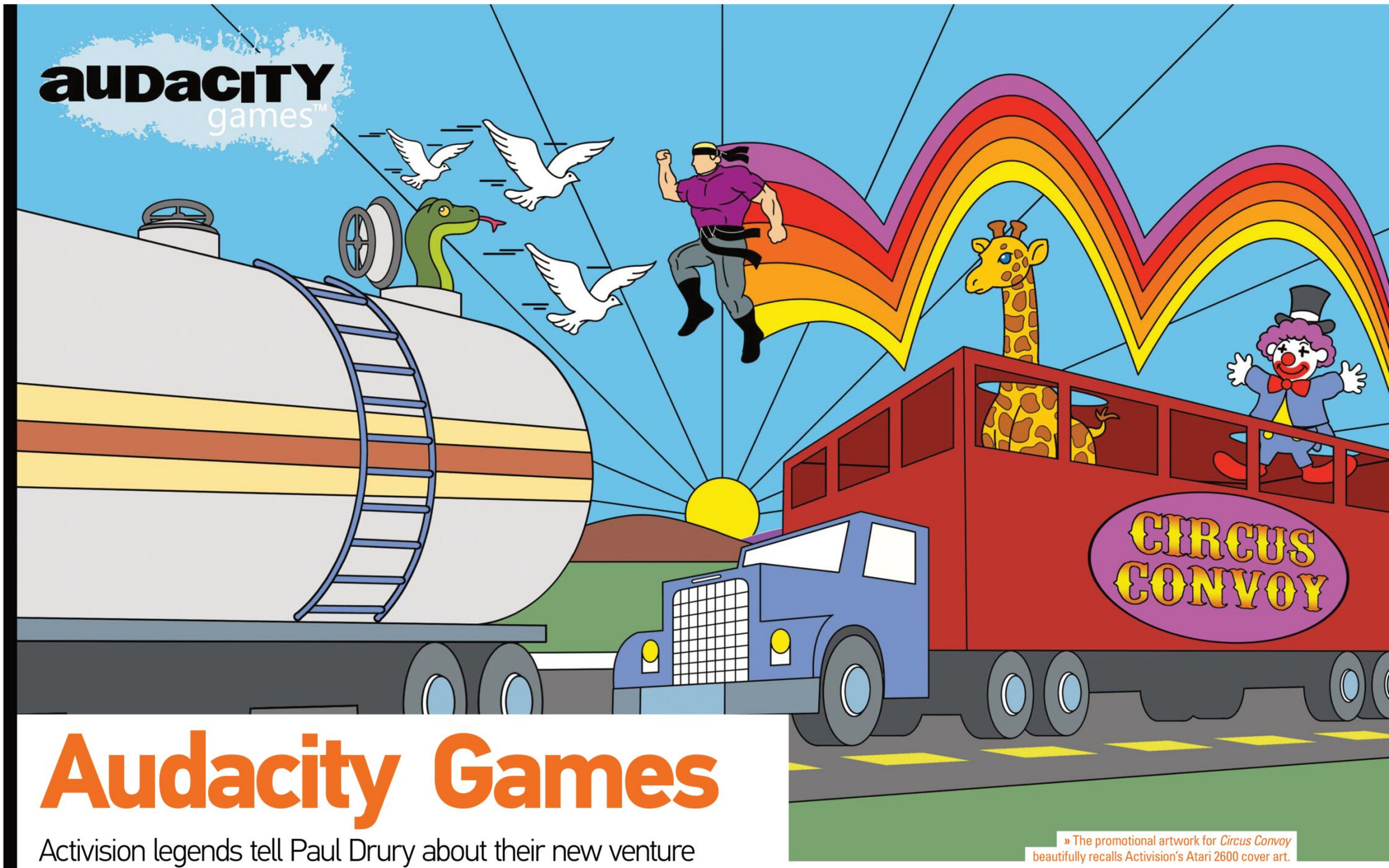


» The promotional artwork for *Circus Convoy* beautifully recalls Activision's Atari 2600 cover art.

Audacity Games

Activision legends tell Paul Drury about their new venture

David Crane left Atari in 1979 to cofound Activision, kick-starting the whole third-party software business, and created the best-selling original title for the Atari 2600, *Pitfall!*. Garry and Dan Kitchen were key players in Activision's East Coast studio, producing *Keystone Kapers* and *Crackpots*, respectively. The trio launched Audacity Games earlier this year, a company dedicated to creating new games for old consoles.

Let's start with the name. Do you see this venture as a bold move?

David Crane: Yes, it's audacious to make new games for a 40-year-old console. People say, "I never go backwards", but we love those old consoles and love the retro gaming people. They're always so pleasant when we visit shows. We wouldn't have done it if we didn't think we could do it right. And the company name had to start with the letter A because of Atari, Activision, Absolute… and now Audacity!

» David Crane, the father of Pitfall Harry.

Garry Kitchen: David and I had been discussing for a while the idea of collaborating on a new 2600 title, with the discussions seemingly occurring every time we came back from a retro gaming conference. The enthusiasm of the community was infectious and the question [of whether we would ever make 2600 games again] inevitably came up at each show. The most amazing part of this three-year journey to me is the fact that we made the game in a complete 'cone of silence'. We were never tempted to even hint at what we were doing because we knew from experience that it wasn't a real product until it was done. The last thing we wanted to do was become vapourware.

Tell us about your first release, *Circus Convoy*.

GK: From the get-go, David had ambitious ideas about the scale of what he wanted to do. His stated goal to me was to make one of the top-five games ever released on the platform. Anything less and it wasn't worth it. With that in mind, David quickly embarked on building the technologies necessary for a large scale, adventure style game, including his impressive resource management system. We toyed with the idea of a road convoy of 18-wheelers, but it didn't take hold until I was able to prove that we could make an impressive-looking truck cab.

» Dan Kitchen was our Desert Island Disks castaway in **RG**212.

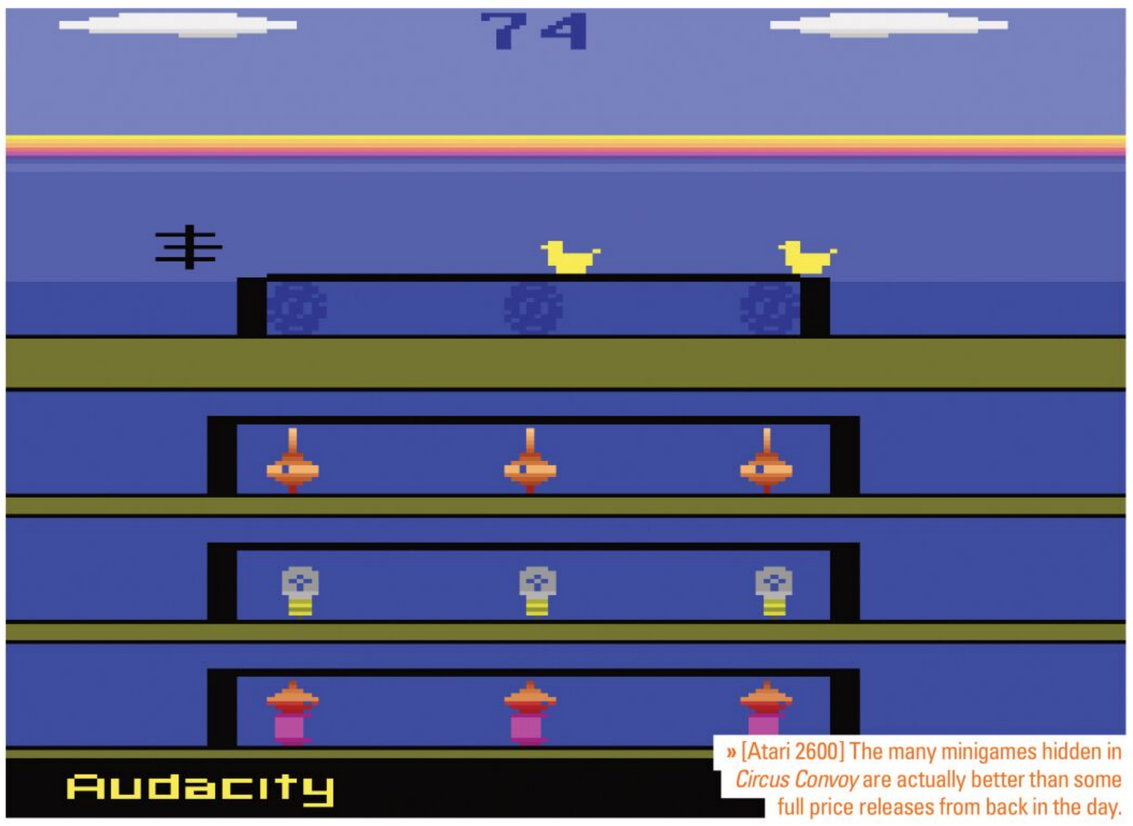
The game is remarkable for something created on hardware over 40 years old.

DC: Yes but it would absolutely be possible to have made *Circus Convoy* in the Eighties – there's no hardware acceleration or anything like that. It would have been an expensive game because the ROM is larger than the ones we used back then but that's because it's the smallest one we could buy these days!

GK: We knew that we had to do our best to raise the bar in all areas, including the graphics. Making graphics on the 2600 requires much more than just artistic talent. There's an enormous amount of technical knowledge needed to create an impressive 2600 art asset. Very early on, David created a powerful graphics editor which allowed us to take the graphics to the next level. With that tool, I was able to experiment and try out a number of different techniques to see if we could do more than we'd done in the past. I remember delivering the giraffe object, to David… we both stepped back and looked at it and said, "Wow, for the system, that's really something special."

» [Atari 2600] *Circus Convoy* is an incredibly colourful and polished game.

» [Atari 2600] Leaping along a moving train can be a tricky business in *Casey's Gold*.



» [Atari 2600] The many minigames hidden in *Circus Convoy* are actually better than some full price releases from back in the day.

» [Atari 2600] It's full steam ahead for Audacity Game's second release, *Casey's Gold*.

The game also manages to include some very modern features, like QR codes.

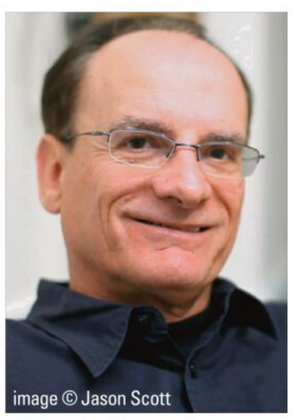
DC: When you design a game, you design it for the hardware. This is done on hardware from the Seventies but then you use techniques you developed over the years. I wanted players to be able to submit scores, so why not get them to point their phones at the screen and it automatically enters your high score? You can get gameplay tips, too – the QR code on-screen takes you straight to the bit you want to know about.

» [Atari 2600] *Circus Convoy* is not ashamed to reference its authors' past triumphs.

There's also been a movement around speedrunning over the last 20 years so all of our games will have an elapsed timer that shows up in your score and that determines your rank. We wanted to put all these things into our game that just weren't there in the Eighties.

Your second game, *Casey's Gold*, pushes the hardware, too.

Dan Kitchen: When I started working again on the 2600 in 2018, I knew that I wanted to recreate a game I had begun in 1983 which had been shelved due to the great videogame crash that year. It was supposed to be the spiritual sequel to my brother Garry's hit, *Keystone Kapers*. It placed the main character, Keystone Kelly, on an Old-West steam train, this time chasing bandits instead of Harry Hooligan. I started to reconstruct the game from memory and I was about a year into the programming when to my surprise, I found the original 1983 prototype cartridge of *Keystone Kannonball* while cleaning out my off-site storage! In the last year, it's evolved into *Casey's Gold*, which is a different game but I'm very happy my original concept of a train adventure game will finally be in the hands of players.



» Garry Kitchen, author of *Keystone Kapers* and *Pressure Cooker*, amongst many others.

What has the reception been like to Audacity Games?

DK: It's been amazing! I knew our fans would be excited that we were designing new games for the 2600, but I never imagined the overwhelming enthusiasm I've seen these last few months. We're delighted to have returned to our roots and are very grateful that the fans are happy, too. I'm certain *Casey's Gold* won't be our last 2600 release.

DC: We had no idea how many we would sell. Pricing was tricky, too. In the early Eighties, games like *Pitfall!* and *Keystone Kapers* had a suggested retail price of $39.99 – that would be $107 today. So we're well under that! We knew there were some collectors – you know who you are – who must have the best, so we produced a VIP edition full of cool stuff. People were clamouring for that. We wanted it to be an exclusive thing so we settled on a 100 copies but we could have sold three times as many!

Are you considering producing games for other retro machines?

DC: We love the retro gaming community and the Atari 2600 was our first love so we went in that direction. We still have more to do on that but there are lots of other retro consoles, too. We will be a cartridge-based business, starting with the 2600, and then try to work with Nintendo to publish on the NES and SNES. We'll only do it if we can work out a licensing agreement and do it right – and high quality, like we did in the Eighties. ✱

Visit www.audacitygames.com for more on current and future releases.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

AUGUST 2004 – Developers are worried about the PSP but cautiously optimistic about the Nintendo DS, and Spider-Man's living it up in his latest film tie-in. It's another month in gaming paradise, and Nick Thorpe is the man with the time machine to take you back there

NEWS AUGUST 2004

The 2004 Summer Olympics took place in Athens from 13-29 August. The Greek city became only the fourth to host the event twice, having last hosted the Olympics in 1896. The USA topped the medal table with 36 gold medals, 39 silver and 26 bronze. Great Britain finished tenth with nine gold, nine silver and 12 bronze, with the highlight being Kelly Holmes winning gold in both the 800m and 1500m track events.

On 19 August, Google made its initial public offering on the NASDAQ stock exchange. The internet search giant's decision to go public had been highly anticipated and shares were offered at an initial $85, climbing to $100 over the course of the day's trading. The sale raised $1.67 billion, and gave the company a market capitalisation of $23 billion.

Mark Thatcher, the son of former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, was arrested under anti-mercenary laws on 25 August at his home in Cape Town, South Africa. Thatcher stood accused of helping to finance a plot to overthrow Teodoro Obiang, the president of Equatorial Guinea, with the goal of installing opposition leader Severo Moto as president. Thatcher had sent the mercenaries involved in the plan $285,000, and regularly communicated with them. He pleaded guilty to his charges in court in January 2005, and received a four year suspended sentence plus a fine amounting to $560,000.

[PSP] Should handheld consoles really be delivering PS2-style experiences like *WipEout Pure*? Japanese devs weren't convinced.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM AUGUST 2004

With all the hype of E3 over, it was time for reality to sink in – and that might not have been of comfort to Sony, as developers appeared worried about the company's new system.

"Concerns over PSP dev costs stem from the platform's power," *Edge* noted. "Some Japanese codeshops see its PS2-style capabilities as a significant risk, since projects will naturally require PS2-style team sizes and budgets." That wasn't the only problem. "In the absence of firm battery-life data, they are concerned about how they should be designing their PSP games, specifically with regard to level length and save points." Developers weren't the only ones expressing concern – an analyst at UFJ Tsubasa Securities in Japan had questioned Sony's sales targets, noting Nintendo's traditional dominance in the handheld sector. The *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* mused that he might be "sipping the sake" and asserted that the PSP would be great for reasons including "it's a style statement", "it's got Solid Snake" and "you can play *Gran Turismo 4* on it". The last point was qualified with a warning that if the developer targeted a 2005 release date, you should probably expect 2007 – all of which seems rather optimistic now that we know *Gran Turismo* released on the PSP in 2009.

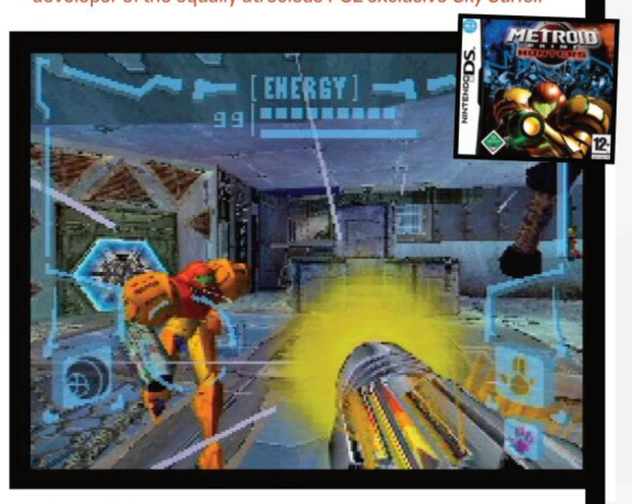
Meanwhile, Nintendo's intriguing new machine was also in the news. "Several developers have said they are looking closely at Nintendo's DS, deeming it 'less sexy but much more financially and technically viable,' thanks to its N64-style capabilities," reported *Edge*. *NGC* was on hand to deliver industry opinions on the new hardware too, with EA's Larry Probst reported to have said, "We're thinking of the DS as the 18 and under crowd and PSP as the 18 and over crowd." Despite these disparate expected demographics, he said that "we'll be represented on both systems". *NGC* also featured a more in-depth overview of the announced games and tech demos so far, rating them on their use of the console's unique characteristics. The magazine was particularly taken with the *Balloon Trip* and *Submarine* tech demos, giving both top marks and remarking that the latter was "rumoured to be 'Shigsy's game'". *Pac'N Roll* was also singled out as "a great example of how the touch screen can add a new dimension

[GameCube] When you talk about great movie licences, *Spider-Man 2* still comes up as an example today.

[Xbox] Despite the clear influence of Japanese aesthetics, *Sudeki* was actually developed in the south of England.

[Xbox] Depending on who you read, *Shellshock: Nam 67* offered either the horrors of war or dodgy game design.

[PS2] A rare 1/10 was bestowed upon *ExZeus*, from the developer of the equally atrocious PS2 exclusive *Sky Surfer*.



[DS] *NGC* wasn't entirely convinced by the controls of *Metroid Prime: Hunters* in its E3 debut.

of fun", but the touch-screen controls of *Metroid Prime: Hunters* were criticised, with the magazine declaring "you wouldn't want to play a full game like this".

Spider-Man 2 was swinging into cinemas around the world, and with it came a tie-in game that proved to be as amazing as Peter Parker himself. The open-world game received a score of 84% in *NGC*, with the reviewer claiming that, "No other game based on a comic-book character has ever come *this* close to doing justice to its hero." The *Official Xbox Magazine* praised the movement, noting that "the swing system is fantastic and totally immersive", and scoring the game 8.6/10. The *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine* complained about a couple of missions, but concluded that the game "despite some off-key moments, fully delivers on its brilliant promise", and scored it 8/10. Also turning heads on multiple platforms was *Shellshock: Nam 67*, a third-person shooter set in the Vietnam War. The game received 8/10 from the *Official PS2 Magazine* and 8.2/10 from *Official Xbox Magazine*, with the latter commenting that it was "a videogame nasty in the same vein as *Manhunt*", but also "a great shooter, even if it is a little short". *Edge* was unimpressed with the game, awarding it 4/10 for being "sabotaged by clumsy design", describing moments where squad mates would "moonwalk over you into the fray spouting idiot soundbites".

As for single-format highlights, there were a few rather different ones this month. Climax's action RPG *Sudeki* impressed *Official Xbox Magazine*, which praised the way the plot "winds and twists cleverly", and how the monsters looked so good that "it seems a shame to slay them". The game scored 8.7/10. Meanwhile on the PS2, Hyper-Devbox's rail shooter *Ex Zeus* was gaining all the wrong kind of attention. *Official PS2 Magazine* claimed that "every object is ugly, misshapen and stupid", and that "end of level bosses provide a break from dull button bashing with some slightly duller button bashing". The game scored 1/10, with the damning comment, "We haven't seen anything like it since we played a PSone game." At least handheld gamers got something to shout about, as the puzzle-platformer *Mario Vs Donkey Kong* arrived on the Game Boy Advance. The spiritual successor to the Game Boy version of *Donkey Kong* was well received by *NGC*, which praised the "exceptionally well pitched" learning curve. The verdict was that "you'll get wiped out repeatedly, you'll get really mad with it, but you'll still pick it up again", and the score was a mighty 88%.

Join us again next month, as things begin to ramp up towards the holiday season and the releases of the PSP and DS grow ever closer. *

CHARTS

AUSUST 2004

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow (Ubisoft)
2 – Harry Potter And The Prisoner Of Azkaban (EA)
3 – UEFA Euro 2004 (EA)
4 – Red Dead Revolver (Rockstar)
5 – Shrek 2 (Activision)

XBOX

1 – Red Dead Revolver (Rockstar)
2 – Thief: Deadly Shadows (Eidos)
3 – UEFA Euro 2004 (EA)
4 – Ninja Gaiden (Microsoft)
5 – Harry Potter And The Prisoner Of Azkaban (EA)

GAMECUBE

1 – Pokémon Colosseum (Nintendo)
2 – Harvest Moon: It's A Wonderful Life (Ubisoft)
3 – Sonic Heroes (Sega)
4 – Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes (Konami)
5 – Mario Party 5 (Nintendo)

MUSIC

1 – Baby Cakes (3 Of A Kind)
2 – Can't Stand Me Now (The Libertines)
3 – Thunderbirds/3AM (Busted)
4 – Dry Your Eyes (The Streets)
5 – Hip To Hip/Can You Feel It (V)

THIS MONTH IN...

NGC

Everyone's excited for the next gen, right? Not Nintendo's European managing director David Gosen. "In every cycle, a manufacturer not profiting from the current cycle is eager to kick-start the next one," he said, taking aim at Microsoft. "For every editor bored with current products, there are hundreds of gamers just discovering them."

Edge

Columnist Toshihiro Nagoshi reveals that he cancelled the E3 reveal of his "dangerous" new game. "The marketing people started to stress one aspect of my game's message in a way that was not the same as its original meaning," he states. "If they don't respect or get my views, I don't see how players will be able to get it right with my game."

Official PlayStation 2 Magazine

What's the future of PlayStation? By 2010 the PS4 will have TV, AM/FM radio support and GPS tracking, and in 2020 the mag sees "MP3 file possession overtaking drink-driving as a social stigma". By 2070, "*Star Wars: Shit, GTA: Let's Just Be Friends* and *Driv3r* all emerge to the sound of heavily muffled tills not ringing."

1UP
5990
HIGH SCORE
44090
2UP

1942

CAPCOM GOES TO WAR

» ARCADE » 1984 » CAPCOM

Sometimes you don't need incredible game mechanics or memorable power-ups in order to create a satisfying shoot-'em-up, you just need a strong theme. Capcom's 1984 hit *1942* is one such example.

While Capcom's game does feature some neat mechanics of its own, it's perhaps best known for its bold choice of setting. Unlike many games of the era which were typically set in space or above strange alien planets, the events of *1942* took place on Earth, more specifically on Earth during the time of the Pacific War, which raged across Asia, Oceania and the Pacific and Indian Oceans from 1941 to 1945.

It was a novel setting for a shmup, but a memorable one and it was fully intentional on the part of Capcom. In an old interview with *Gamest* magazine, translated by Shmuplations.com, designer Yoshiki Okamoto revealed that the team wanted to make a game that could be easily picked up by players and chose the World War II setting as a result. "Starting with *1942*, we began to take the Western market into account when developing our games. That was also why the player ship was an American P-38 – we had our eyes on the American market."

Okamoto also ensured that *1942*'s gameplay was every bit as interesting as its distinctive World War II setting. The most unusual mechanic in your Lockheed P-38 Lightning's repertoire is its ability to perform a set number of loops that can be used to avoid incoming bullets or even enemy planes if you're dextrous enough. Another cool feature your fighter has is the ability to be flanked by wingmen which will enhance your firepower for as long as they stay around. Power-ups are acquired by shooting down squadrons of red planes and you'll need to pick up every single one of them to ensure the best chance of success.

Like many shooters of the time, *1942* pits your lone fighter against seemingly insurmountable odds, but the odds feel that little bit higher due to the unique (for the time at least) setting. Your goal is to reach the safety of Tokyo and destroy the entire Japanese air fleet as well as its many battleships in the process, but it's a task I've never been able to achieve in all my years of playing. Still, it's currently available on *Capcom Arcade Stadium*, alongside several other games in the series, so maybe it's time to finally settle the score once and for all.

30 YEARS OF

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

THE FASTEST HERO IN VIDEOGAMES IS 30 YEARS OLD, AND HE'S SHOWING NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN. WITH SERIES PRODUCER TAKASHI IIZUKA, WE LOOK AT SONIC FROM A VARIETY OF ANGLES TO FIND OUT WHY HIS CAREER HAS BEEN A MARATHON RATHER THAN A SPRINT

WORDS BY **NICK THORPE**

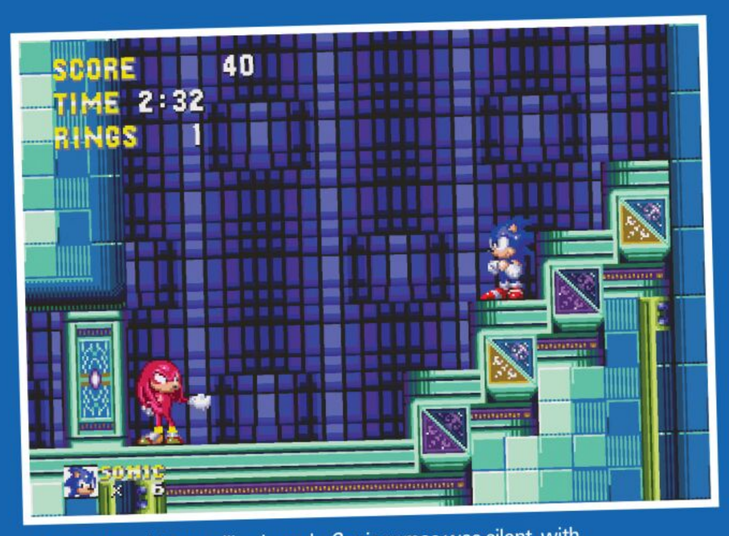
Takashi Iizuka – producer, Sonic Team.

If videogame characters could attend their own award shows, which ones do you think would get the full A-list, red carpet treatment? It's a strange question, but if you indulge us and give it a little thought, you'll probably come to the conclusion that there aren't too many. Pac-Man would definitely be there, probably to collect a lifetime achievement award, and Mario wouldn't be far behind. Lara Croft would be the favourite of the paparazzi, and Pikachu would be there to give some of the most insightful interviews of all. Sonic The Hedgehog would certainly join all of them, too – and he'd almost certainly be the one making the evening news because of some attention-grabbing antics.

Sonic was designed to steal the show from day one. Sega wanted a character to take its business to the next level and allow the Mega Drive to compete against the might of Mario, and that's exactly what it got. In those early days, Sonic's speed ensured that his game was in the spotlight. Sega of America's bold tactic of running mall tours to compare *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Super Mario World* relied on Sonic's flashy nature, and it worked. When Sega needed to demonstrate the power of the Dreamcast, Sonic's dramatic escape from a rampaging killer whale did the job admirably.

But like many celebrities, Sonic has had his trials and tribulations over the years. Fans have been determined to stick by him, sometimes to the bafflement of those watching from the sidelines. In part, that's because the dark days of 2006 feel like half a lifetime ago – and as far as Sonic's concerned, they are – but it's also because *Sonic* games are unique. When you're in full flow, guiding Sonic as he leaps over obstacles and spins through enemies at a pace that you never thought possible at the start of the game, the sense of mastery you feel is second to none. It feels almost akin to a videogaming form of parkour, and fans live for those moments. When Sonic is at his best, he delivers exhilarating action like no other character can.

Today, Takashi Iizuka arguably knows Sonic better than anybody else, having been involved with the speedy superstar for the vast majority of the series to date. He started his career as a designer on *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles*, moved into a directorial role for the popular *Sonic Adventure* games, and today acts as the producer of the series and head of Sonic Team. We've asked him to explain a number of aspects of how he and his team approach the *Sonic* series, in order to uncover the philosophies and ideas that have shaped such an enduring part of videogaming – and indeed, pop culture in general. ▶



» [Mega Drive] Storytelling in early *Sonic* games was silent, with character animations wholly responsible for conveying personality.

» Early art for Sonic shows him as rather carefree, brushing his hands off here as if to show his heroism is no big deal.

» [Xbox 360] One area that Sonic's character isn't well-versed in is romance – though it has been attempted.

INIMITABLE IMAGE

SONIC'S CHARACTER DESIGN AND PERSONALITY HAVE LONG BEEN PART OF HIS APPEAL – HERE'S HOW SEGA KEEPS HIS IMAGE FRESH

Sonic is a character that is rarely caught standing still, both in a literal and conceptual sense. That's always been the case, too – just check out the original story comic that ran in Japan's *Mega Drive Fan* magazine, which is full of oddball concepts from the game's development period. Sonic comes across very differently there, sporting some wild-looking fangs and acting as the frontman of a rock band, but it makes a lot of sense if you still think of Sonic as the "hedgehog with attitude" that he was always said to be. Really, from the moment that he turned to you with a scowl and started tapping his foot if you left the controller alone, that's what he always was.

But we've had different interpretations of just what Sonic should be over the years. Recent games have seen him throwing out comical quips like a Saturday morning cartoon character, and his movie personality was excitable and childlike. Elsewhere, he has taken a different path – the 2006 *Sonic The Hedgehog* game went for a serious approach, while *Sonic The Comic* portrays Sonic as a hero whose arrogance and condescension sometimes cause him problems.

So with that in mind, how does the veteran Sonic Team head Takashi Iizuka see Sonic's personality today? "Sonic is a playful hedgehog who never shies away from an adventure. He's focused on justice and doing what's right by his pals, no matter where that may lead him," he replies. "His quick wit takes him far but can sometimes get caught up in a speedy whirlwind – that's where his trusted friends come in, bringing him back down to earth and keeping him grounded."

The role of Sonic's friends has changed over the years, with the likes of Tails, Knuckles and Shadow taking just as much gameplay prominence as story importance in the early days of the move into 3D. In recent times they've been present but only in secondary story roles. In the same way, the kind of stories that Sonic features in have also changed, from tales of destruction and calamity in the likes of *Sonic The Hedgehog* (2006) and *Sonic Forces* to more light-hearted, comedic stories like *Sonic Colours*. You should probably expect to see more such changes in the future, too. "Sonic is an extremely versatile character, in that he can be adapted into many different forms when telling a story, as you mentioned. Experimenting with different approaches has been an exciting process, and we plan on continuing that so long as it remains accessible to our team," Iizuka confirms.

Staying relevant for 30 years has its challenges, and for all of the various interpretations of his personality, Sonic has had just as many distinctive visual styles to keep up with the trends. "Consumers have always taken a liking to Sonic's playful and colourful appearance, and we always try to keep his appearance rather consistent for the sake of ensuring his fans can recognise him no matter what medium he appears in," explains Iizuka. "His vibrant colour and mischievous expressions resonated with kids and adults alike who have now followed Sonic through the years, and slight changes to his physical appearance has kept audiences on their toes as they watch Sonic transition into different forms throughout his life."

Those changes were made obvious even to the less observant in 2011, when *Sonic Generations* brought the modern Sonic and his 1991 counterpart together for an adventure through time. "Initially, we thought bringing the 'classic' Sonic into the fold was just going to be a 20th anniversary project, but it was met with such positive responses from fans that we knew we would keep him around," Iizuka reveals. "In fact, we have released *Sonic Mania* focused on the 'classic' Sonic in 2017. The 'classic' Sonic is a popular iteration who will hopefully be a part of the blue blur's future."

As Sonic has grown into a multi-generational fan favourite, players who grew up in different eras have formed their own attachments – for many *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is the ultimate touchstone, but for younger fans it can be *Sonic Adventure 2*, *Sonic Generations* or even *Sonic Mania*. With the focus on classic Sonic and spin-off projects such as *Sonic Boom* in recent years, some fans have begun to question whether Sega sees different iterations of Sonic almost as distinctive characters with their own audiences, rather than a single character. "Sonic obviously has a long-lasting appeal for fans, regardless of his form, but he's the same lovable character at the end of the day," says Iizuka, refuting that notion. "The nostalgic factor allows us to translate his unique personality into a number of different mediums, where he stays entirely relatable and recognisable. It's not really up to us to dictate how our audiences interpret Sonic, but instead it's our job to ensure they see him take on new forms that further perpetuate his spunky attitude that fans know and love." ▶

CLASSIC SONIC

■ Naoto Oshima's character concept was brilliantly illustrated by Akira Watanabe, and informed the basic expectation of Sonic's appearance in Japan right up until *Sonic Adventure* came along.

SONIC BOOM

■ This rendition isn't so bad in hindsight, especially compared to the top-heavy treatment Knuckles got in *Sonic Boom*. But the scarf is an odd stylistic flourish, and why did he tape up his shoes?

SONIC ADVENTURE SONIC

■ Yuji Uekawa's visual refresh gave Sonic longer legs, longer spikes and a smaller belly, as well as green eyes. Twisted, dynamic poses mark the 2D illustrations in the early part of this era too.

ERINACEIDAE EVOLUTION

HOW SONIC'S LOOK HAS DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS

MODERN SONIC

■ While *Sonic Adventure* was mostly represented with 2D artwork, Sega has subtly moved away from the 3D artwork used in that era to give Sonic the familiar look that he has today in his 3D appearances.

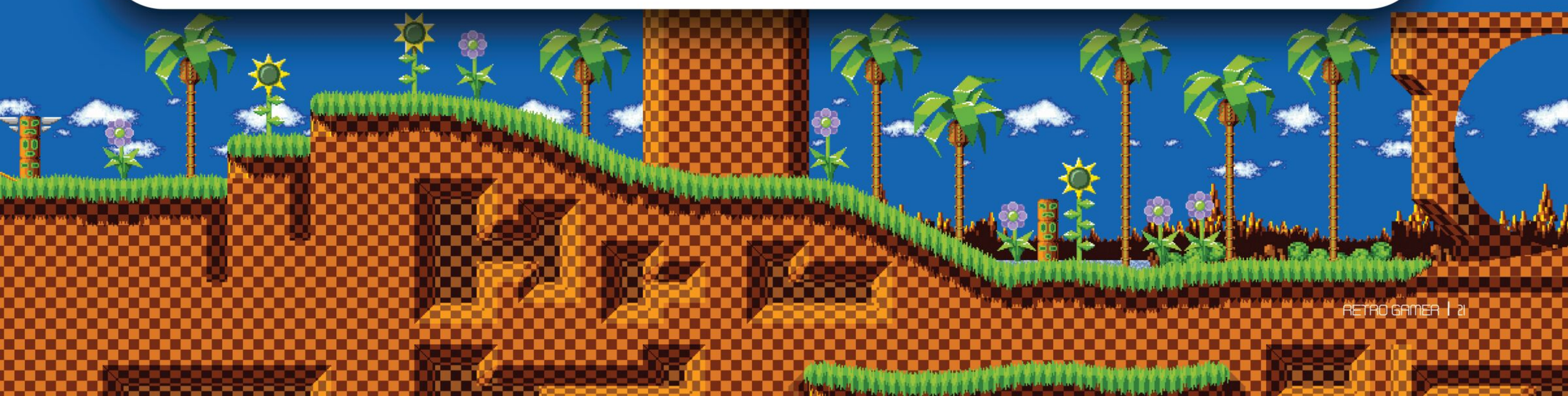
MOVIE SONIC

■ Paramount redesigned its movie model, criticised for its weird humanoid legs and creepy eyes. The end result, aided by Tyson Hesse, is more furry than spiky but worth the $5 million budget increase.

Courtesy Paramount Pictures and Sega Of America.

WESTERN SONIC

■ Greg Martin's take on Sonic, adopted by other Western artists such as Duncan Gutteridge, is often known by fans as 'Mohawk Sonic' as he often appears to have just a single row of spikes.



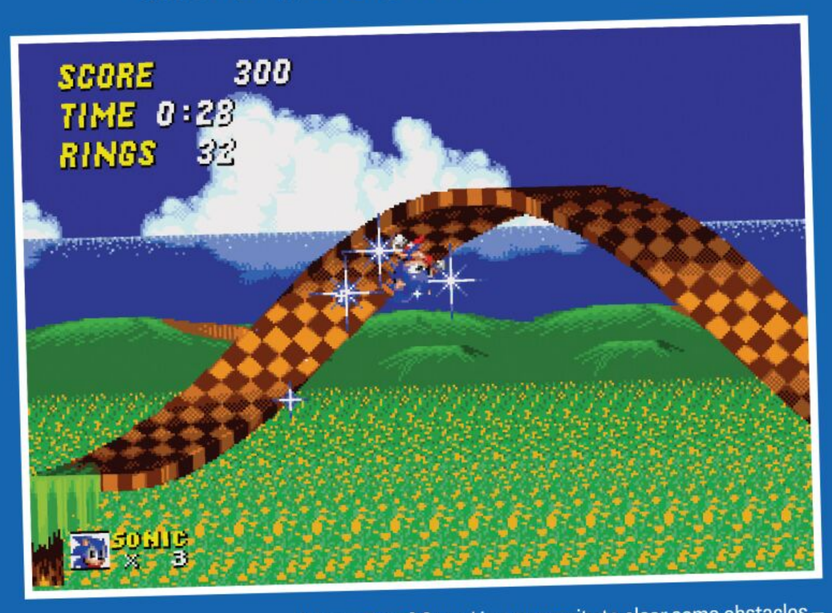
GOTTA GO FAST

EVERY SUPERHERO NEEDS THEIR DEFINING SUPERPOWER, AND SONIC'S IS SPEED – BUT HOW DOES SEGA KEEP HIM RUNNING OUT OF CONTROL?

What would Sonic be without his speed? Roadkill, probably – after all, he does have a habit of being chased by trucks, whales and other large things that could very easily crush him. But in gaming terms, Sonic's speed is both a blessing and a curse – a spectacular superpower that makes the games potentially unfriendly to newcomers, as hazards hurtle along at a pace that can be tricky to deal with.

So what's it like, designing games for a character whose defining power is his extraordinary speed? "There are a lot of benefits and challenges to keeping Sonic 'up to speed' per se," says Iizuka. "In terms of the challenges, it motivates us to always push the envelope on technology. In fact, that's how Sonic was created! The original creator Yuji Naka was a videogame programmer developing an algorithm that allowed an object to move smoothly on a curve. With the idea of a ball in mind, he partnered with artist Naoto Ohshima to come up with a hedgehog character, as the animals ball up as part of their nature." Of course, that doesn't quite match up with the rather relaxed pace at which most hedgehogs move, and that's where Iizuka feels the team faces adversity. "While hedgehogs aren't particularly fast, that's where we were challenged to think outside of the box and use some creative freedoms," he says. "In terms of the benefits, the theme of speed has allowed us to explore a variety of genres such as platformers, racing games, RPGs and more. It's such a versatile theme because it plays into Sonic's key characteristic of perseverance, and keeps the storyline going as he races toward his next objective."

» [PS3] The green lock-on reticule here shows Sonic is ready to home in on a target, letting him attack accurately at speed.



» [Mega Drive] Speed is a necessity to clear some obstacles – if Sonic's going too slow, he'll just fall off here.

What Sonic's speed has meant to the game design has evolved over the years. In the early days, going fast was very much a privilege rather than a right – indeed, many fans are surprised by the slow pace of stages such as Marble Zone in the original game. "When thinking about the stage design for the entire game, we want to make sure we aren't just repeating the same fun over and over, but that each stage is going to have something unique about it," says Iizuka, before highlighting how tedious the games could become. "If we just had Sonic running fast through all the levels the gameplay would be too simple, so we design things to balance out that exhilaration of high-speed running with tense moments of action platforming," he says. In the very first game, you had to earn the more spectacular moments after leaving Green Hill Zone.

"Moving through a 3D space at high speed has been a challenge since we first did it in *Sonic Adventure* and is something the team has been refining as an experience since then," Iizuka continues. Indeed, if Sonic's mechanics went largely unchanged then the precision demanded of players would likely have hampered their speed, as they tried to line up to strike enemies. "A lot of work is put into the dynamic balancing and adjusting of handling

» [PC] Chase sequences are a common feature of *Sonic* games that highlight the hero's high speed.

» [Game Gear] At high speeds, Sonic can actually skim across water by running or bouncing.

at high speed, including camera work that all needs to be managed at super high speeds, and not to mention the fundamental level design that needs to guide the player through a fun experience even at maximum speeds," says Iizuka, who also points out the new mechanics added to mitigate the issue. "All the iconic features such as the homing attack and grinding were actions born out of this need to design for a fun experience at high speed."

Over the last 15 years in particular, the emphasis on how to represent Sonic's speed has shifted. "In the more recent games, we have included a boost mechanic and added stages focused on high speed to amplify the speed, but if you looked at the balance in comparison to the older games, the current games probably have more action platforming," says Iizuka. In games like *Sonic Unleashed* and *Sonic Forces*, it can feel as though anything less than top speed is wrong. But at the other end of things, *Sonic Lost World* raised eyebrows by including a dedicated run button. It seems as though the team keeps an open mind as to the best approach, too. "Sonic's speed capabilities are uniquely designed for each game, and vary depending on the game's objectives, but we do always try to take the community's feedback on fan-favourite features into account during the design process," says Iizuka.

» [PC] *Sonic Lost World* is an unusual entry in the series because players have access to a dedicated run button.

Some stages and games are particularly beloved by true speed demons – Chemical Plant Zone's enormous slopes and boosters allow for Sonic to hit his maximum speed, while *Sonic Advance 2* is particularly renowned for how fast you go through its many loops and jumps. Which games would Iizuka recommend to thrill-seeking fans? "Some of the best stages to hit top speeds are featured in *Sonic Unleashed* and *Sonic Mania*," he replies. "Moreover, we have achieved the fastest speed in *Sonic Forces*. In addition, we designed the game with seven special stages that unlock Super Sonic, and as players collect the seven Chaos Emeralds, they'll be able to move the stages at lightning speed." ▶

» [PC] The boost mechanic is vital to modern games, as it allows Sonic to hit his top speed near instantly.

BROKEN SPEEDOMETER

JUST HOW FAST IS SONIC, REALLY?

It's easy to assume, just from his name, that Sonic The Hedgehog is able to run at least as fast as the speed of sound. But is there a definitive answer as to his maximum speed? The short answer is no. The longer answer is that we have some measurements from official sources, but they do all seem to contradict each other.

Sonic has always been described as being capable of supersonic speeds, but that hasn't always been borne out by what we've seen in the games. For example, *Sonic Chaos* features one of the earliest speed measurements in the series, and that counter tops out at 999km/h – but with the speed of sound being around 1,235km/h, that's a subsonic speed. *Sonic Unleashed* throws out much higher numbers for its speed measurement, but doesn't assign units to them, making them rather useless for comparison to anything except other speed measurements from the same game.

Things get further complicated by other claims. The description of the Light Speed Shoes in *Sonic Adventure* tells us that Sonic can move at the speed of light, and the manual of *Sonic Adventure DX: Director's Cut* describes Sonic as hypersonic. That would put his speed at a minimum of Mach 5, or 3,806mp/h. But does that describe him when he's got his speed shoes equipped? How about when he gets all the Chaos Emeralds and transforms into Super Sonic? We already know that Super Sonic is capable of flying through space, and presumably the lack of resistance there would only make him capable of higher speeds.

BUILT FOR SPEED

SPEED IS ONLY WORTHWHILE IF YOU HAVE SOMEWHERE TO GO. HOW DOES SEGA GO ABOUT BUILDING THE ENVIRONMENTS THAT SONIC INHABITS?

When it comes to creating levels, Sonic can be a tricky character to design for. Exploration is often a key part of the platform game genre, and the 16-bit *Sonic* games in particular are known for having some fairly large, sprawling stages. But with Sonic's sense of speed in mind, slowing down and checking out every route is something that many players won't be inclined to do – some might even say it goes against the point of the game. This has been a design conundrum since the very beginning of the series, so how are those things reconciled?

"Level design for 2D *Sonic* games requires application of a core design philosophy – do not create any situation where 'you cannot proceed if you make a mistake'. It sounds obvious as a fundamental rule, but it is also one of the factors that causes stress when thinking about creating the gameplay experience," explains Iizuka, going back to the early days of the series. "2D *Sonic* games are not about carefully moving through the world.

» [Mega Drive] Boss battles can add variety, such as the puzzle element of figuring out how to damage this boss.

We want people to run through at high speed and have a fun time, so the whole 'you cannot progress if you make a mistake' philosophy was taken to heart and level design was approached so that 'even if you fail, there is a different path forward.'" Indeed, often the kind of exploration you do in a *Sonic* game is accidental – you'll be aiming for bonuses and an easy ride in the stage's upper reaches, only to fall and discover an alternative route. "That's why we created such a complicated level design with upper and lower routes, much more complicated than many other titles," Iizuka confirms.

That philosophy held well through the Mega Drive years, and for a long time to come in handheld games, but in the late-Nineties the team faced the challenge of creating 3D environments that retained a similar feeling. "This was an interesting process, and one that took a lot of hard work from our Sega team," says Iizuka. "Some of the challenges we encountered when creating a stage to feel like a *Sonic* stage in 3D was camera work. For 2D *Sonic* games you will be able to get to the goal by progressing to the right far enough, but for 3D *Sonic* titles it was possible to just get lost walking around in any direction, so a lot of that exhilaration wasn't there," he recalls. The solution was to use the tools available to nudge the player into following their own instincts, as Iizuka explains. "It was in that environment where the new camera system was born, where even if the road had twists and turns to the right or to the left, it would move to show you the path forward so you would want to continue moving forward into what the camera was showing you, and that allowed us to create the first 3D action title *Sonic Adventure*."

No matter which era of the *Sonic* series you look at, there is a certain expectation of the kinds of environments that should appear, with the early iconography of checkerboard patterns and a progression from natural environments to urban and mechanical ones as the game

» [Dreamcast] Smart camera work helps players navigate open 3D areas like Sky Deck.

HEDGEHOG HEAVEN VS

HEAVEN MOMENT
REEL GOOD TIME

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

■ The slot reels in the background of Casino Night Zone could so easily have just been a bit of background detail, but the fact that you could use them to gamble for more rings really added something to the stage – as did the fact that you had to play pinball with Sonic to do so.

HEAVEN MOMENT
FALSE FINISH

SONIC GENERATIONS

■ Just as in *Sonic The Hedgehog* (2006), Crisis City Act 1 takes place during an ongoing disaster. Right as you think you've escaped the apocalyptic city, the traditional end post gets swept up by a tornado and flies away, forcing you to push just a little further through the devastation to finish.

HEAVEN MOMENT
BURNING BRIDGE

SONIC MANIA

■ When you first try to cross a bridge in Green Hill Zone with the fire shield, it will instead burn and collapse beneath you. It's a special moment that not only opens up a new route, but shows that the development team can conjure up new tricks from the raw material of the classic games.

» [Dreamcast] Grind rails keep you moving in the right direction, and add style points to boot.

progresses. "Fans that have been following *Sonic The Hedgehog* since the early stages of the series feel connected to these early environments, including the early island/forest stages, casino/pinball stages and underwater stages," says Iizuka. "However, the new updates that we've made to the *Sonic The Hedgehog* series seem to be well-received by newcomers and veterans of the Sonic series, and for that, we are so pleased!" Indeed, while some games like *Sonic Lost World* lean heavily on the old abstract look, *Sonic Unleashed* took things in a different direction with realistic environments that many fans have come to love.

Another area in which stage design philosophy has had to shift over the years is in the creation of boss battles. "We made boss battles a different way to play from the other running stages, and felt it was important to deliver content where the player would get a feeling of satisfaction upon completion," says Iizuka. "For 2D *Sonic* titles that came at the end of every stage, and for 3D *Sonic* titles boss battles were used to bring excitement to the story points," he continues – explaining why such battles are less frequent in the later games. "To get that feeling of satisfaction, balance was most important. If the battle was too easy it wouldn't be satisfying, but it also couldn't be too difficult, or things would just be frustrating, so we were always trying to make it the right balance of difficulty."

» [Wii] In more modern games like *Sonic Colours*, stages often transition between 2D and 3D game styles.

» [PC] Classic stage archetypes have a long history, with this casino stage in *Sonic Forces* referencing *Sonic 2*

» [PC] A big challenge when designing for multiple characters is accounting for all of their unique abilities.

Making that judgement about difficulty is now a more complex process, too. "In the past we would usually just play as a team to get input, or get the opinions from other co-workers, but if we wanted to get a better read on the difficulty, we would work with external research companies," explains Iizuka. "But today we run large playtests and get responses to questions like 'where did you make a mistake?' and 'what was stressful about that?' and turn it all into data to analyse and better inform us on how we can better balance the difficulty of the experience." ▶

HEDGEHOG HELL

INSPIRED AND INFURIATING LEVEL DESIGN MOMENTS FROM SONIC'S HISTORY

HELL MOMENT: DEATH PIT

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

■ This nasty little area represents one of the few places in a *Sonic* game where you can get truly stuck, with no way out except death, as you can't jump high enough to get out. Pity those who fall down here as Super Sonic – the wait for your rings to run out feels endless.

HELL MOMENT: BARREL OF DOOM

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

■ You have to press up and down on the d-pad to move this barrel. That isn't explained anywhere in the game or manual, and it reacts to jumping enough to trick you into thinking that's how it works. It isn't, and a whole generation of kids fell at this particularly ill-considered hurdle.

HELL MOMENT: FINAL HAUNT HERO MISSION

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

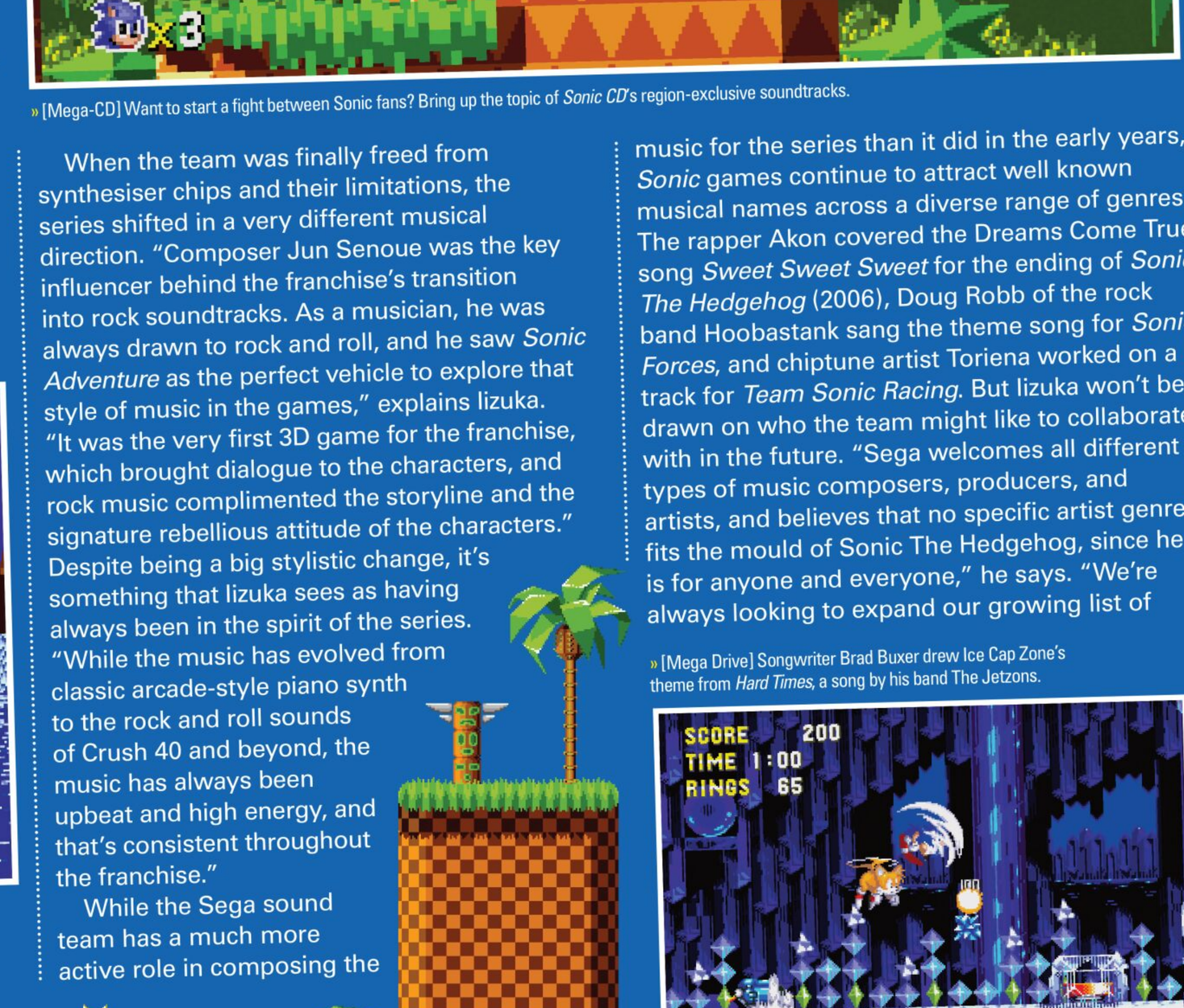
■ All you have to do here is reach the goal ring – but if you use Shadow's Hero power, Chaos Control, you can inadvertently activate switches for the Dark mission and cause the goal ring to disappear. Finishing the stage requires you to backtrack and turn them all off again.

TURBO TUNES

THE FASTEST HERO IN VIDEOGAMES NEEDS THE ULTIMATE RUNNING PLAYLIST, AND WITH CAREFUL COMPOSITION AND CELEBRITY CAMEOS, HE HAS IT

The audio of the *Sonic* series has been consistently excellent over the last 30 years, to the point that even those games that are less celebrated in their totality are praised for their music. The fact that we can pick out favourite tracks from *Shadow The Hedgehog* and *Sonic Unleashed* as easily as we can *Sonic 3* or *Sonic Colours* has to say something (and no, it's not "you're a bunch of Sonic nerds", you sarcastic lot). Much of the groundwork for this excellence can be traced back to an unusual approach to videogame music, by the standards of the early Nineties.

In order to give its big game a sound that would resonate with the wider public, Sega arranged for *Sonic The Hedgehog*'s music to be composed by Masato Nakamura, the bassist for the wildly popular Japanese band Dreams Come True. "The music in early *Sonic The Hedgehog* games established a signature sound for the franchise, especially with fan-favourite levels like the Green Hill Zone," says Iizuka, explaining the precedent that Nakamura's work set for the series. The bassist would also contribute the soundtrack for the sequel, but left the series after that. "After the success of *Sonic The Hedgehog 1* and *2*, we maintained the arcade-style sound for *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles* for Mega Drive," says Iizuka. The theme of input from major recording artists continued too, as the third game features major contributions from members of Michael Jackson's song writing team – and if rumours are to be believed, even the controversial pop star himself.



» [Mega-CD] Want to start a fight between Sonic fans? Bring up the topic of *Sonic CD*'s region-exclusive soundtracks.

» [Mega Drive] Our doctor told us that you can't hear images. We replied by showing them this, and they relented.

When the team was finally freed from synthesiser chips and their limitations, the series shifted in a very different musical direction. "Composer Jun Senoue was the key influencer behind the franchise's transition into rock soundtracks. As a musician, he was always drawn to rock and roll, and he saw *Sonic Adventure* as the perfect vehicle to explore that style of music in the games," explains Iizuka. "It was the very first 3D game for the franchise, which brought dialogue to the characters, and rock music complimented the storyline and the signature rebellious attitude of the characters." Despite being a big stylistic change, it's something that Iizuka sees as having always been in the spirit of the series. "While the music has evolved from classic arcade-style piano synth to the rock and roll sounds of Crush 40 and beyond, the music has always been upbeat and high energy, and that's consistent throughout the franchise."

While the Sega sound team has a much more active role in composing the music for the series than it did in the early years, *Sonic* games continue to attract well known musical names across a diverse range of genres. The rapper Akon covered the Dreams Come True song *Sweet Sweet Sweet* for the ending of *Sonic The Hedgehog* (2006), Doug Robb of the rock band Hoobastank sang the theme song for *Sonic Forces*, and chiptune artist Toriena worked on a track for *Team Sonic Racing*. But Iizuka won't be drawn on who the team might like to collaborate with in the future. "Sega welcomes all different types of music composers, producers, and artists, and believes that no specific artist genre fits the mould of Sonic The Hedgehog, since he is for anyone and everyone," he says. "We're always looking to expand our growing list of

» [Mega Drive] Songwriter Brad Buxer drew Ice Cap Zone's theme from *Hard Times*, a song by his band The Jetzons.

collaborative artists for new *Sonic* music our fans will love – and we look forward to whatever artist we work with next!"

No matter who is composing for the games, they often have the tricky job of writing music for a stage without being able to fully experience it. "Before we begin composing for a stage, we collect materials to give an image or impression to set the scene. At that time there may be actual stages to play, but usually that is not the case, so we get concept artwork or scenarios that can visually represent the stage," says Iizuka. "Sometimes we don't even have that and still need to start composing, so we get a written document outlining something unique to the stage and get to work from there."

But while the stage themes are excellent and our ears will always detect the sound of Green Hill Zone's distinctive opening, it's most often the vocal themes that really stick in the minds of the fans – whether that's *Sonic R*'s wonderfully Nineties tunes or the raps that accompany Knuckles stages in *Sonic Adventure 2*. Indeed, Iizuka identifies a pair of vocal themes as the biggest fan favourites. "Over the years, there have been a couple of songs that have stood out to our fanbase, more than others, including the theme song of *Sonic Adventure Open Your Heart* and the theme song of *Sonic Adventure 2 Live & Learn*." Jun Senoue can regularly be found performing these songs at events like Sonic Adventure Music Experience and Summer Of Sonic – and right there with him, there will be a crowd of lively fans, belting out the lyrics with everything their lungs can muster. ▶

» [Dreamcast] Memetic mutations ahoy – just say "up and down and all around" to any Sonic fan and you'll evoke memories of this stage.

» [PS2] Spin-offs like *Sonic Riders* often have music that will get your blood pumping too, regardless of their other qualities.

» [PS4] The joy of revisiting old stages in newer games is hearing how the sound team manages to refresh excellent tracks like *Bingo Highway*.

TOP TRACKS

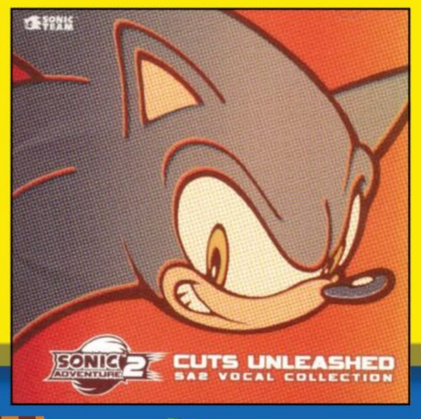
THE SONIC SOUNDTRACK ALBUMS THAT EVERY SONIC FAN SHOULD OWN

SONIC R
1998

Some people believe this is cringeworthy, but they are massively wrong. These vocal tracks will appeal to anyone who can truly feel the sunshine – which should be all of you.

CUTS UNLEASHED: SA2 VOCAL COLLECTION
2001

There aren't many tracks on this album, but *Live & Learn*, *Escape From The City* and *EGGMAN* are here – and those are the sorts of favourites that you'll hear at any gathering of Sonic fans.

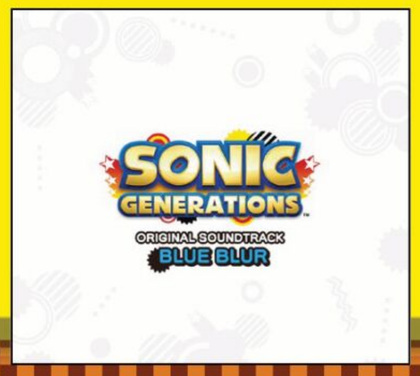


SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 1 & 2 SOUNDTRACK
2011

This album contains the classic tracks from the first two *Sonic* games – but the real reason to get it is for Masato Nakamura's original demo tracks, which had never previously been released.

SONIC GENERATIONS ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK: BLUE BLUR
2011

Take a selection of the greatest stages of the series' first 20 years, get the excellent music from them and then remix the lot. How could it fail? It didn't, and all the 3DS tracks are included too.

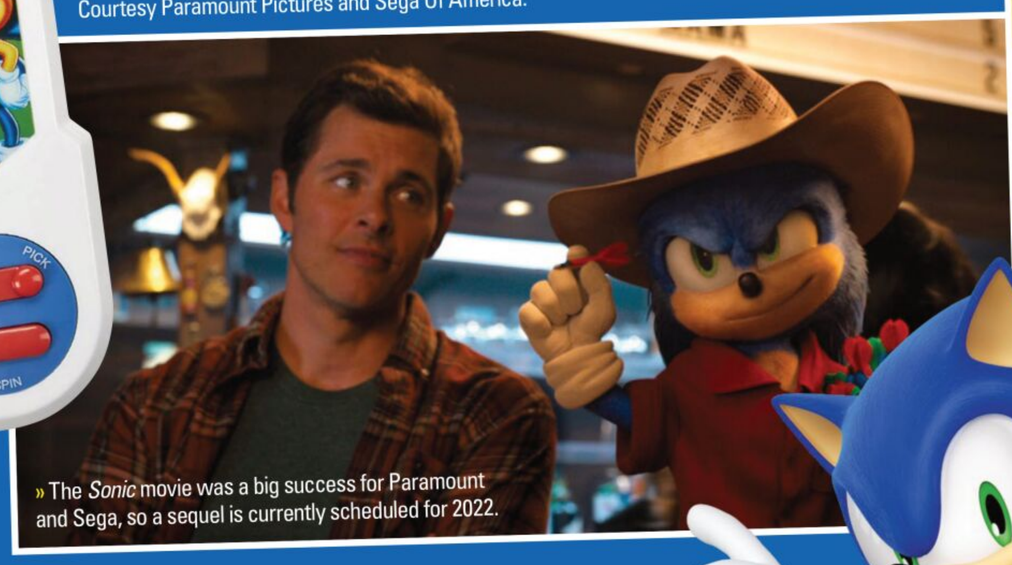


SONIC MANIA
2017

Apart from having been released as a lovely vinyl LP, *Sonic Mania*'s soundtrack contains the game's excellent original compositions – the Studiopolis Zone track in particular is excellent.

» Tiger Electronics made quite a few *Sonic* products, and even bagged the licence for a Game.com handheld game.

Courtesy Paramount Pictures and Sega Of America.



» The *Sonic* movie was a big success for Paramount and Sega, so a sequel is currently scheduled for 2022.

» *Sonic The Comic* is particularly beloved by many UK fans, despite (or perhaps because of) Sonic's tendency to be a jerk.

RUNNING THE GAMUT

WITH PLENTY OF TOYS, TV SHOWS, A MOVIE AND MORE, SONIC'S WORLD HAS ALWAYS STRETCHED FAR BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF VIDEOGAMES ALONE

If it feels like Sonic currently enjoys a higher profile than he has for quite some time, you're probably right about that. The *Sonic The Hedgehog* movie starring Ben Schwartz, Jim Carrey and James Marsden became the highest grossing videogame adaptation of all time in North America, and a sequel is in the works. IDW Publishing launched a new comic series in 2018, and there has been plenty of new merchandise to coincide with the arrival of Sonic's 30th anniversary. "We're never going to shy away from a project just because it falls outside of videogames! In recent years, we've really been focusing on restoring fans' trust in our products and continuing to grow and position our brand for the future, so the possibilities are endless," says Iizuka.

Of course, Sonic has been here before. The enormous success of the early *Sonic* games quickly catapulted Sega's hero to superstardom, to the point that it's claimed that during the early Nineties, Sonic was recognised by more American children than Mickey Mouse. That kind of fame naturally caught the interest of people outside the world of videogames. In fact, two TV cartoons ran at the same time – the comedic *Adventures Of Sonic The Hedgehog* and the darker *Sonic The Hedgehog*, the latter of which provided the basis for a comic series by Archie Comics that ran from 1993-2017. UK-based readers instead had Fleetway's *Sonic The Comic* from 1993-2002, and its characters and stories have been continued by dedicated online fans since 2003. These adaptations weren't always tremendously faithful to the source material, but with the limitations of how the classic *Sonic* games told their stories, the TV shows and comics were essential for fans who wanted to dive deeper into Sonic's world. The way the games work has changed over the last 30 years, but that desire for a richer world hasn't gone away.

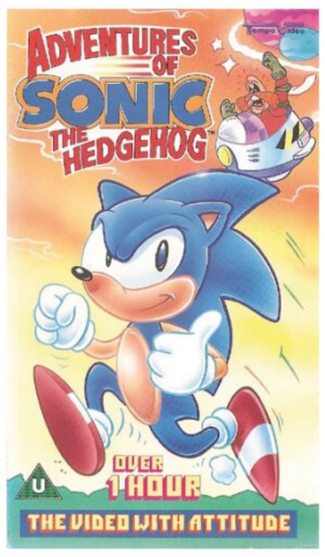
Another thing that has evolved over the years is Sonic's relationship with the audience, as Iizuka points out. "The biggest difference between Sonic's initial success and his fame today is how many memories people have with his character. We see parents passing on their love for the franchise to their children nowadays, sharing memories of their favourite game or iteration of the blue blur. We didn't see that when Sonic first came to life, of course, because he was so new to the space," he explains. In the same way that baby boomer parents would show their children Looney Tunes and Disney animations, the fond memories of millennial

GET ANIMATED

SONIC HAS BEEN IN QUITE A FEW ANIMATED SHOWS NOW –

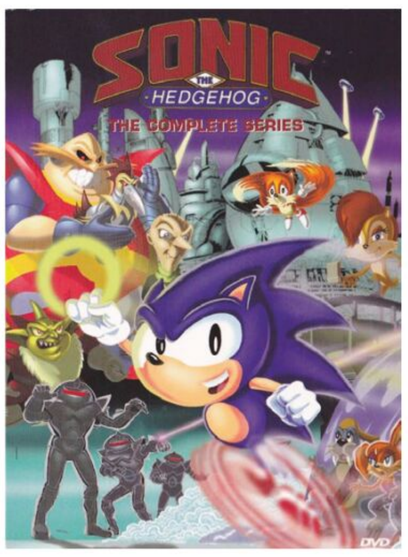
ADVENTURES OF SONIC THE HEDGEHOG
1993

Designed for first-run syndication, Sonic and Tails take on Robotnik in all sorts of one-shot adventures that are heavy on the comedy. Jaleel White's Sonic is fondly remembered, but it's Long John Baldry's portrayal of Robotnik that has generated the many memes that fans love today. There's plenty of nostalgic value here, but like most early adaptations, it's not close to the games.



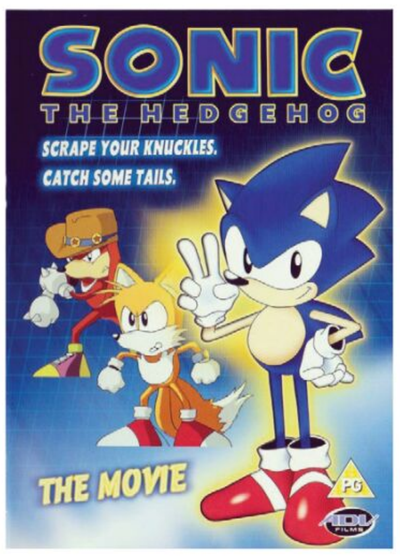
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG
1993

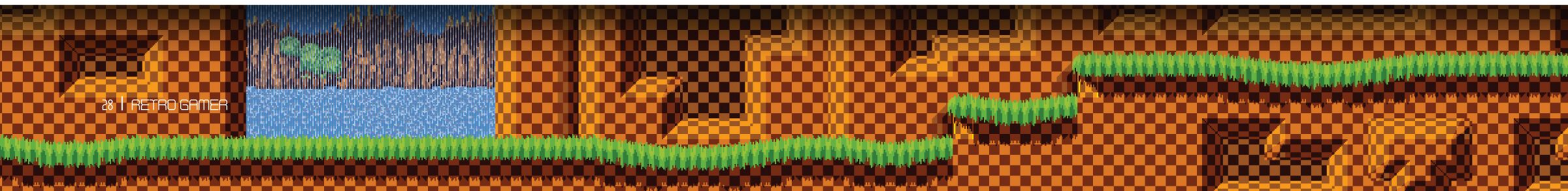
In this cartoon, Sonic is part of a group of freedom fighters in a dystopian world ruled by Robotnik – who is surprisingly sinister for being voiced by Jim Cummings, best known for voicing Winnie The Pooh. Some fans loved the ongoing story, but ABC cancelled the show on an unresolved cliffhanger after two seasons, leaving the characters to live on in Archie's comic series.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (OVA)
1996

This two-part video release was Sonic's first Japanese animated outing, and was released as *Sonic The Hedgehog: The Movie* in English-speaking markets in 1999. The story is not particularly complex, with Sonic being lured into a battle with Metal Sonic, but it's definitely one of the most visually appealing *Sonic* animations thanks to some great action sequences.





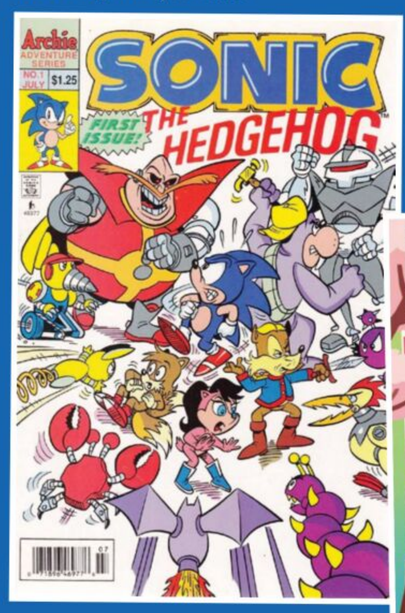
parents have ensured that Sonic didn't simply become a fad that faded away. "Now we really get to see what our audience has chosen to carry with them for years and how they connect with Sonic on a multi-decade level. That really fuels a lot of our decisions for the brand, since we're always trying to listen to what fans want and adjust our ventures accordingly."

You can see the results of some of those decisions in the kinds of merchandise available. Classic Sonic is sighted just as often as his modern counterpart these days, and the 16-bit iconography of the series is still in heavy use. Past products have even returned to the market, as with Hasbro's reissue of the *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* LCD game, and this is the kind of thing that Iizuka highlights as being popular. "The retro products have always been highly requested by our fanbase, so we're always open to it!"

While Sega is part of a large group of companies that includes Sega Toys and the CG animation studio Marza Animation Planet, working outside videogames inevitably means working with other companies. Sometimes those collaborations will produce unfortunate results, as happened with the widely criticised initial trailer for the *Sonic The Hedgehog* movie in 2019. "It was clear to both our team at Sega and the folks at Paramount that we needed to reapproach Sonic's design after the initial trailer was published. Because of that, they were open to listening to the fan base, which allowed us to provide our expertise as well," says Iizuka. But despite being very protective of how Sonic is portrayed, the company prefers to trust its partners rather than retaining the option for direct intervention. "We never stepped in to control the process, because Paramount was and is the expert on film making, so there was no world in which we intended to take over creative control."

Plans are already in the works for Sonic's next big starring role too, as he's heading to Netflix in 2022 for his sixth TV series. "*Sonic Prime* is a 24-episode long high-octane adventure that draws upon the keystones of the brand. In the series, the fate of a strange new multiverse rests in Sonic's hands. It's more than a race to save the universe, it's a journey of self-discovery and redemption," explains Iizuka. We're still waiting for our first look at the series, but we know that WildBrain's Vancouver studio will animate *Sonic Prime*, while Man Of Action Entertainment will be bringing their experience from *Ben 10* and *Big Hero 6* to the show as showrunners and executive producers. With both this show and the new movie, you'll be seeing a lot of Sonic well past the birthday celebrations, and that just underscores what Iizuka has said – as a character, Sonic is now a multi-generational favourite. No matter how you choose to enjoy his adventures, he's a part of the pop culture establishment now, and we expect to see him running for a long time to come. ✱

» This head-only Sonic plush seems rather more like something Eggman would buy, don't you think?



» Archie Comics was one of the earliest companies to expand the *Sonic* universe, naturally via comics.

» First 4 Figures is a frequent Sonic licensee, producing high end figures for the collector's market.

» The 30th anniversary is being celebrated in various ways, including via IDW's comic series.

» Sonic has also done a lap or two of the tabletop gaming circuit with *Sonic Battle Racers* and *Sonic Boom Monopoly*.

WE SEPARATE THE MARATHON WORTHY FROM THOSE TO FAST FORWARD

SONIC UNDERGROUND

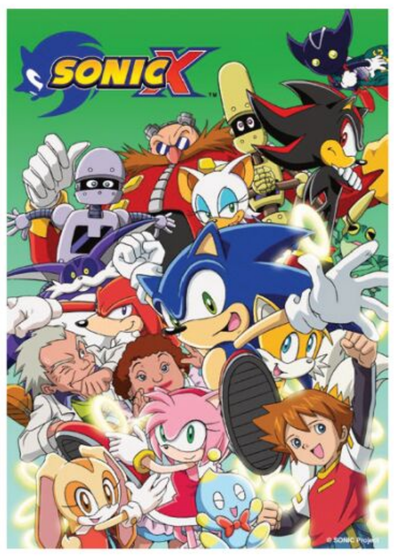
1999

Sonic and his siblings Sonia and Manic are out to rescue their kidnapped mother, Aleena – the queen of Mobius. Oh, and they're a band too, and their instruments turn into weapons. The animation here is never of particularly high-quality and the concept is a mess, especially given its total lack of relation to *Sonic Adventure* which was the current game at the time.

SONIC X

2003

This Japanese production has Sonic living on Earth with a wealthy new human friend Chris. Despite this, it uses the existing game cast rather than introducing lots of new characters, and even adapts the events of *Sonic Adventure 2* Those who prefer their cartoons faithful to the games enjoy it, but the heavy-handed American localisation has often come in for criticism.



SONIC BOOM

2014

This CG animated cartoon is a light-hearted comedy with wacky plots such as Eggman becoming Sonic's housemate, and Amy holding a sensitivity seminar for Sonic. Once you get past the controversial character designs, the show is actually a pretty good watch for the whole family, as a good amount of humour has been thrown in for older fans and the parents of young ones.

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THE EVOLUTION OF SPY VS SPY

By channelling the slapstick comedy of a Mad Magazine comic strip, Spy Vs Spy raised the bar for two-player gaming. Co-creator Richard Spitalny reflects on his game's evolution, and its influence on the sequels and successors that followed

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

Although better known for its movies, Warner Bros was also a major player in the early years of US videogames. It famously bought Atari, Inc in 1976, and then funded the set-up of Lucasfilm Games in 1982. Less well known is that Warner later bought into First Star Software, and during that meeting it picked out Warner characters to base games on, as First Star founder Richard Spitalny remembers. "I was looking for the most interactive characters with strategy elements, and *Spy Vs Spy* had this built-in interaction," Richard explains. "Even though you were reading a comic strip, you were vicariously experiencing two spies trying to outsmart each other, and there was a payoff at the end. So it was about the interactivity that was inherent in the property."

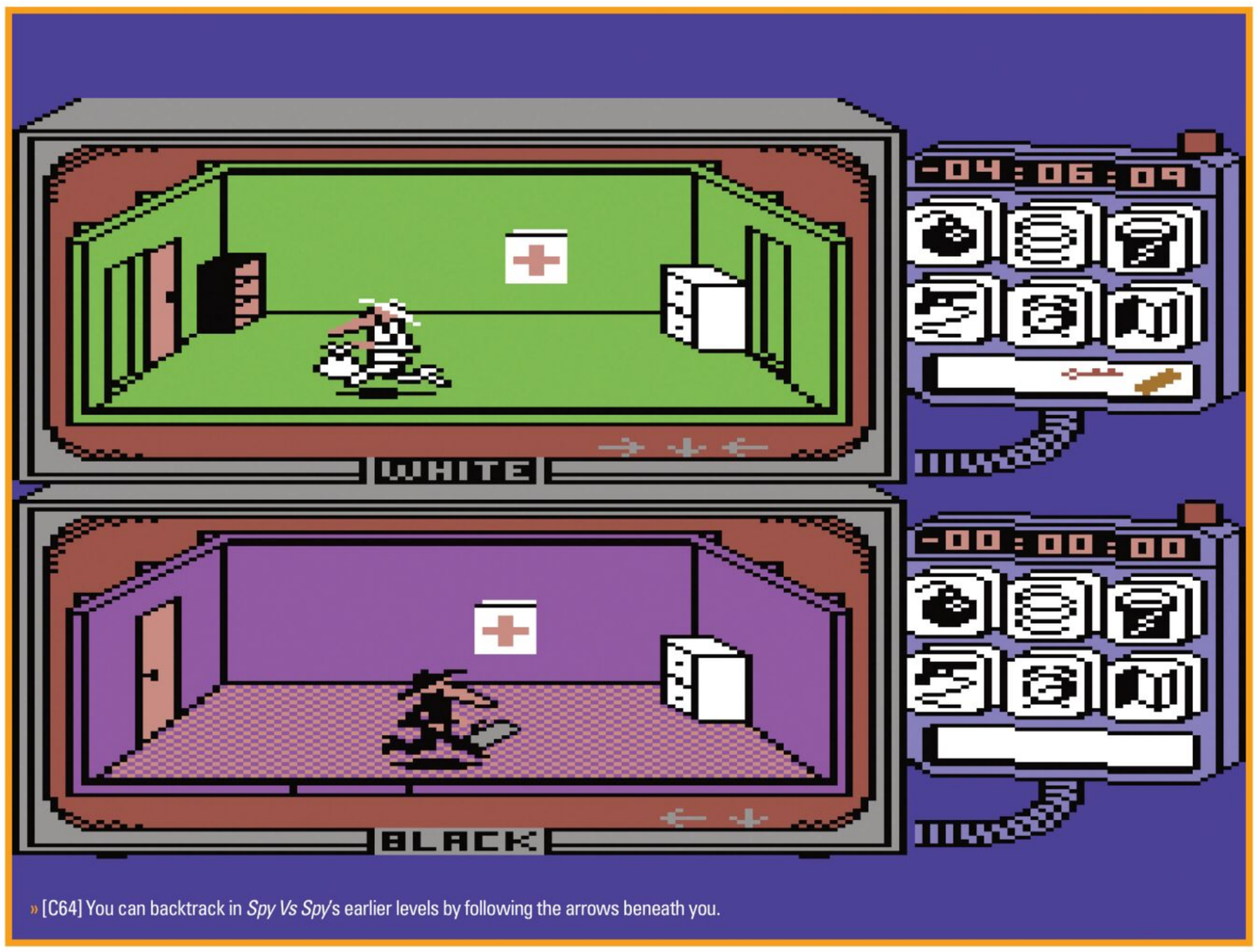
» Although now retired, Richard Spitalny would be happy to consult on future *Spy Vs Spy* games.

With the *Spy Vs Spy* licence in place, Richard partnered with coder Mike Riedel. Their initial focus was adapting the comic strip's traps into videogame form, although they used some artistic licence. "Since the game was inside an embassy there were going to be doors," Richard points out, "so we added the bucket over the door trick. I asked Mike if a spring could shoot the spies not just across one room but into the next room, and when he said yes we had to use a spring! So the traps were just down to our own imaginations, although they had to be in the *spirit* of the comic strip." For each trap they devised, Richard and Mike thought of an item that could neutralise it, with the exception of one: a time bomb, which once set couldn't be deactivated. "It was just us trying to help the game not all be the same; to have something different, and it seemed to be in keeping with the characters," Richard reasons. "Because not only could you blow yourself up with your own trap if you didn't remember where you'd put it, but if you were stupid enough to go into a room where there was a time bomb ticking then goodbye!"

Of course, creating traps for *Spy Vs Spy* was one thing, but getting the spies to trigger them

» [C64] Each of the traps in *Spy Vs Spy* can be deactivated, except for the time bomb!

» [C64] Rather than collect items in *Spy Vs Spy*, you can steal your opponent's just before they escape.



» [C64] You can backtrack in *Spy Vs Spy*'s earlier levels by following the arrows beneath you.

was another, and so an objective of collecting items in a briefcase was added, which also gave meaning to a decision to add slapstick combat to the project. "It was the solution to how we were going to get the traps into the game," Richard notes, "because having to search got the player to go from room to room, looking and exploring. And adding a briefcase that carried multiple items gave the combat much more impact, because when you lost you also lost everything you had collected. So players could even wait in ambush at the exit and try to win the game in hand-to-hand combat."

Having innovated with so many aspects of *Spy Vs Spy,* Richard felt he should give players some guidance, and so he asked Mike to mark their progress on earlier levels with arrows that could then be used to backtrack with. "I was afraid people would get lost," Richard admits. "They might remember that the money was a couple of rooms ago, but they might forget exactly where, so that's where the 'breadcrumbs' came from. I don't know if anybody or a lot of people used them, but nobody had played a game like this before, so why not give them the ability to retrace their steps?" Very thoughtful.

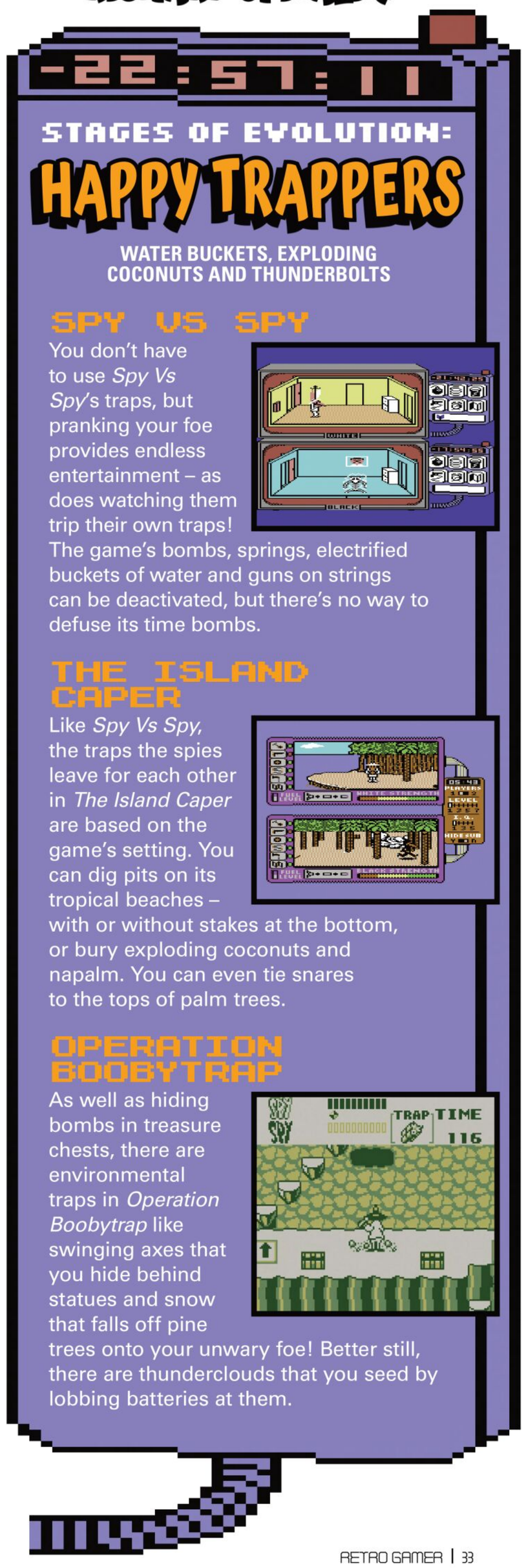
Unsurprisingly, reviewers focused on the hilarity of setting off traps in *Spy Vs Spy* rather than the game's handy 'breadcrumbs' mechanics, but more importantly they loved the game, and it sold in its millions. Naturally, a sequel was required. "*The Island Caper* was more expansive," Richard says of the follow-up, "and it got the spies outside, so there were more places to hide things. There were also scrolling screens. We felt we could do all of that, but still be true to the intellectual property and the gameplay that we had created for *Spy Vs Spy.* We also figured that people would appreciate playing in a new world, where apart from attaching snares to palm trees there was pretty much sand everywhere else to hide the other traps in."

Not all of the sand in *The Island Caper* was suitable for hiding things in, however, as the follow-up's beaches had areas of quicksand that required *Summer Games*-level joystick gymnastics to escape. Richard viewed this as a contrast to the run of play. "They were like the time bomb not having a remedy," Richard equates. "Having players squirm and spin their way out came up in one of the back and forths with Mike. I honestly can't remember if we saw *Summer Games* first, but it just seemed obvious to use the joystick in a different way. It *could* have evolved out of the combat in *Spy Vs Spy,* but then we had combat in *Island Caper* too. We also had a gun in there, and that was the beginning of the snowball fights in *Arctic Antics*."

On the spies' trip to the Arctic, Richard describes the long-range combat in their third outing as a natural development of the previous two games in the now popular series. "So that was an evolution," Richard reviews, "where we'd had hand-to-hand combat and we'd had the gun, so what were the spies going to do in the Arctic? Well they could have snowball fights! Again, it was an attempt to have the third game in the series look and feel different from the first two while still ▶

"The traps were just down to our own imaginations, although they had to be in the spirit of the comic strip"

RICHARD SPITALNY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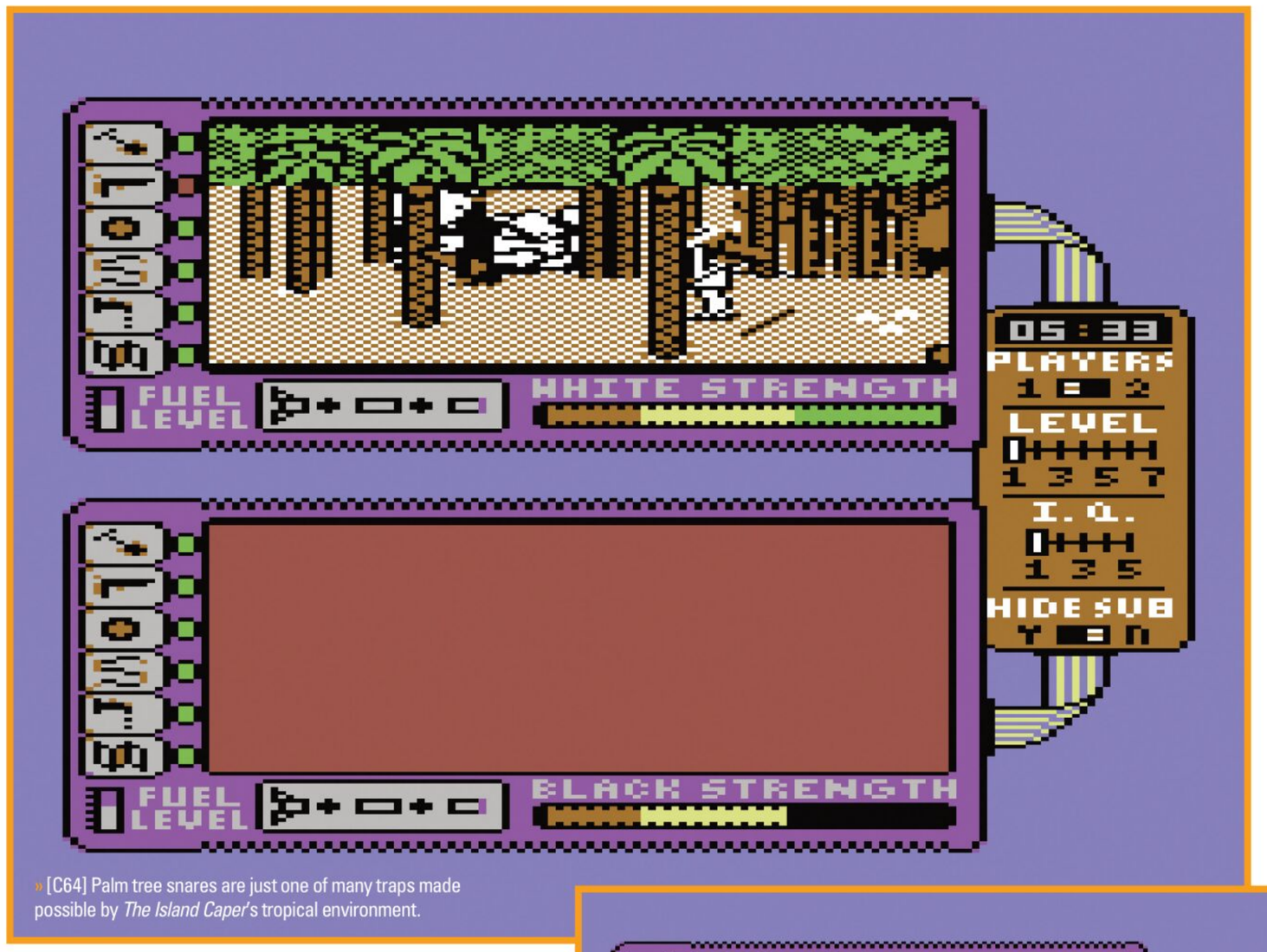
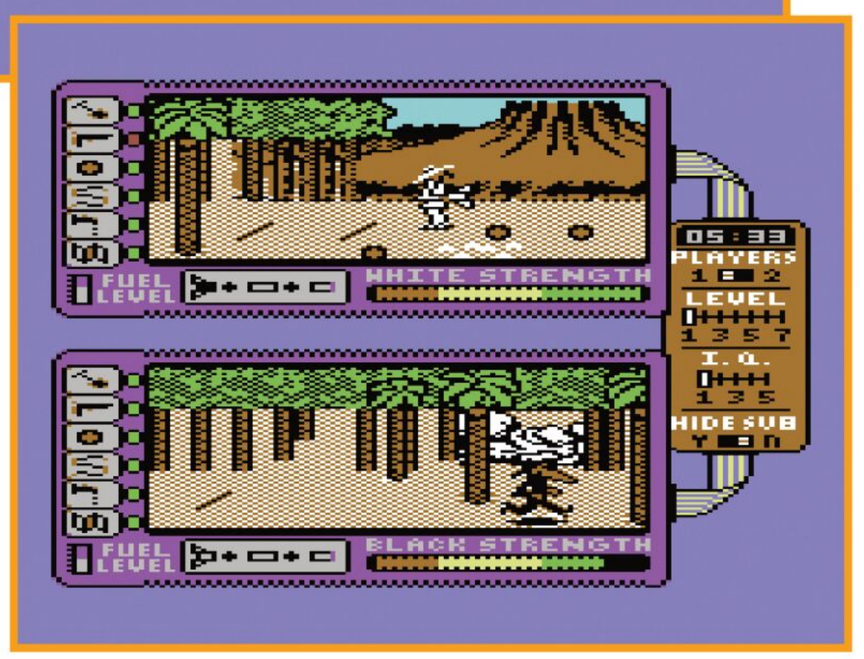
STAGES OF EVOLUTION:
HAPPY TRAPPERS
WATER BUCKETS, EXPLODING COCONUTS AND THUNDERBOLTS
SPY VS SPY
You don't have to use *Spy Vs Spy*'s traps, but pranking your foe provides endless entertainment – as does watching them trip their own traps! The game's bombs, springs, electrified buckets of water and guns on strings can be deactivated, but there's no way to defuse its time bombs.
THE ISLAND CAPER
Like *Spy Vs Spy,* the traps the spies leave for each other in *The Island Caper* are based on the game's setting. You can dig pits on its tropical beaches – with or without stakes at the bottom, or bury exploding coconuts and napalm. You can even tie snares to the tops of palm trees.
OPERATION BOOBYTRAP
As well as hiding bombs in treasure chests, there are environmental traps in *Operation Boobytrap* like swinging axes that you hide behind statues and snow that falls off pine trees onto your unwary foe! Better still, there are thunderclouds that you seed by lobbing batteries at them.
TRAP TIME
116

"We had combat in Island Caper too. We also had a gun in there, and that was the beginning of the snowball fights in Arctic Antics"

RICHARD SPITALNY



» [C64] Palm tree snares are just one of many traps made possible by *The Island Caper*'s tropical environment.



» [C64] The traps buried under *The Island Caper*'s beaches make finding missile sections dangerous work.

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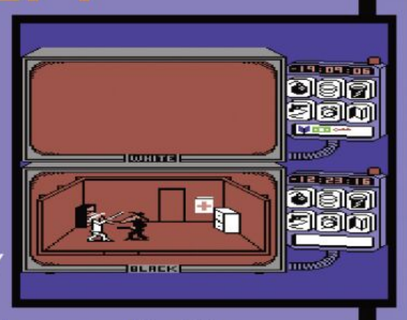
STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

CHORTLE COMBAT

HOW WOODEN CLUBS LED TO SNOWBALL FIGHTS AND PUNCH-UPS

SPY VS SPY



There's nothing that says "I hate you!" like bashing someone with a wooden club, so it feels right that the opposing pair in *Spy Vs Spy* carry them everywhere they go in case of battle. There are only two moves: a forward thrust and an up/down attack, but that's all that's needed to knock your foe out.

ARCTIC ANTICS

As well as the original's clubs, there's a gun in *The Island Caper* that inspired the long-range combat in *Arctic Antics*. This involves snowball fights, which require a certain amount of skill, because as well as targeting your opponent you also need to scoop up each icy projectile.

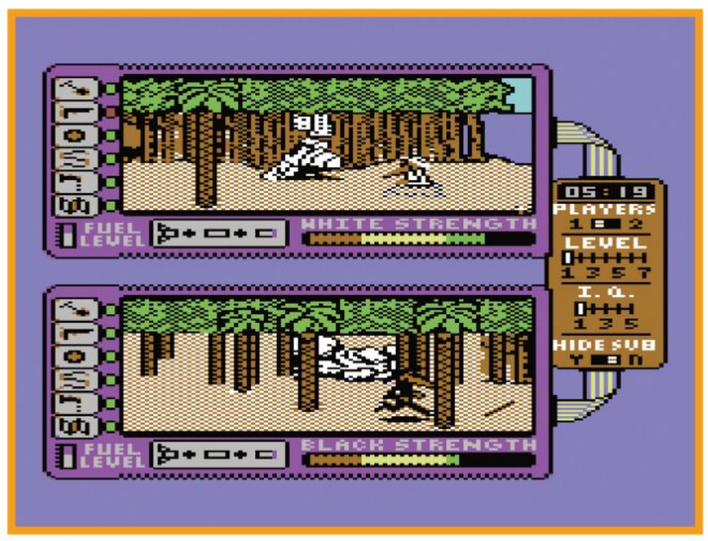
OPERATION BOOBYTRAP

The spies don't mess around in *Operation Boobytrap*; any thought of range weapons is put aside in favour or charging at the enemy and using them as a punching bag! The trick to winning is timing. If you land the first punch and then keep them coming quickly enough you should prevail.

▶ being true to Simulvision, Simulplay and the Trapulator – and the booby-trap! So we were trying to move the series forward visually, and in terms of gameplay."

Further differentiations followed, including a clever alternative to metering the spy's energy that took account of their latest mission's frozen environment. "I wanted to have igloos, because otherwise you would have just had snow and ice," Richard considers. "Then we came up with a reason to include them, so that was where the spies would go to warm up. They also got the player to a specific place, so that the other player could lay in wait. You had the exit door to the airport in *Spy Vs Spy*, and the igloos were like that, because one player would know the other player would have to go to the igloo if they had lost most of their heat."

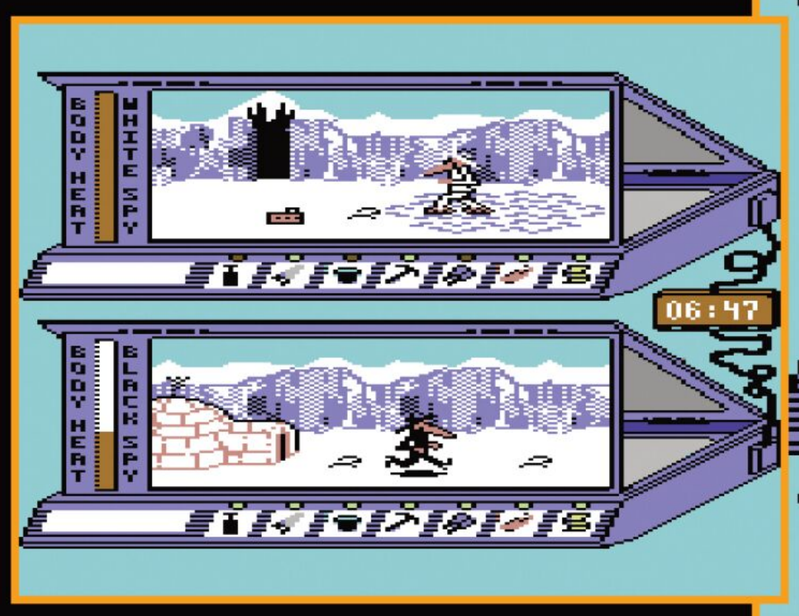
As he had done with *Spy Vs Spy* and *The Island Caper*, Richard designed a finale for *Arctic Antics*, where the winner took off in a spaceship. On its side he trailed the next *Spy* title, not knowing that it would never get any further than its snappy name. "There was absolutely no game design at all for *Spies In Space*," Richard recalls. "I just wanted to come up with a teaser, because I hoped there would be another sequel. So instead of the plane in *Spy Vs Spy* or the submarine in *Island Caper* we had a spaceship in *Arctic Antic*'s end sequence. We didn't know yet that things would get more and more difficult for First Star because of what was going on in the industry, so we let the world know that the spies would be back, because we thought they would be."



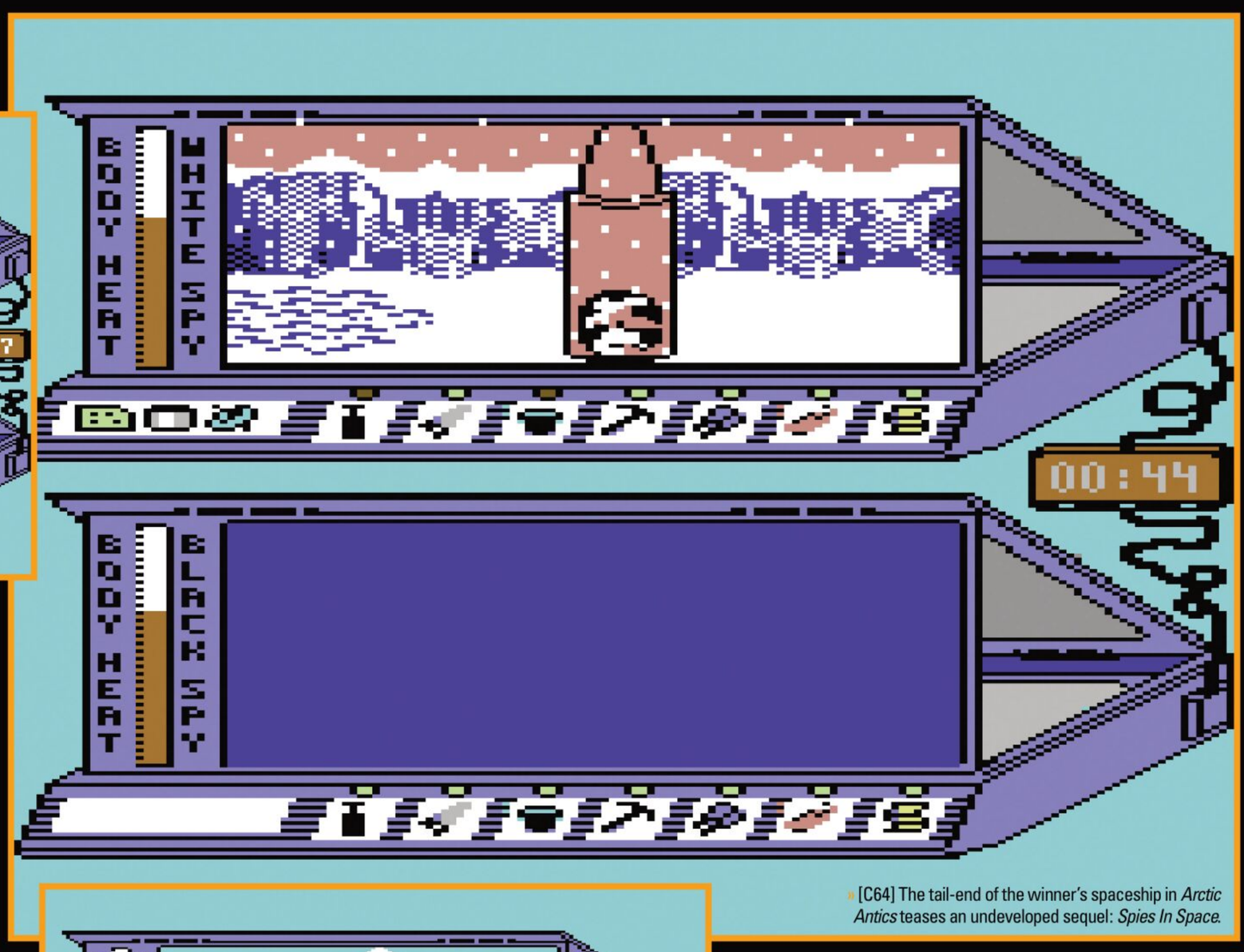
» [C64] Escaping *The Island Caper*'s quicksand requires frantic joystick movements much like the 100m in *Summer Games*.

In fairness, the spies did return – but not for six years and on a console rather than home computers. Japanese firm Kemco designed its Game Boy debut – *Operation Boobytrap*, but Richard had final approval, and agreed that the split-screen had to go. "Because of how small the screen was we didn't even think about it, especially since Nintendo was so hot on linked play," Richard makes clear. "That would have been something that Kemco decided on, probably as a way to increase sales. But physically sharing the Game Boy was dismissed out of hand. I don't even think you could have kept the screen still if you were both trying to interact with the Game Boy using different sets of buttons!"

Other decisions were left to Richard's Far Eastern partners, including *Operation Boobytrap*'s multiple worlds and light platforming elements – both series firsts. "Kemco was advancing the series by offering a game that had more than one environment – there was a lot of moving from world to world in games at the time," Richard

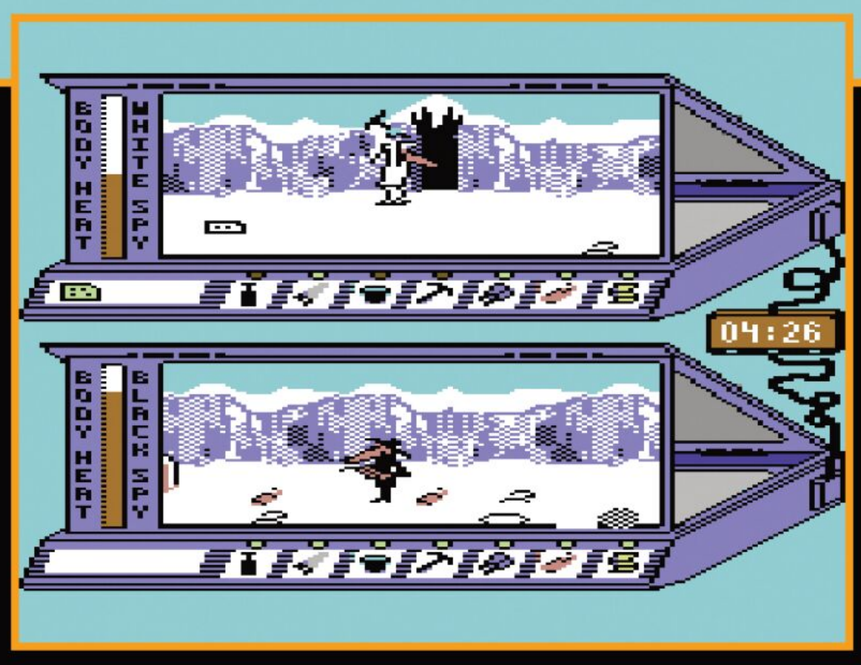


» [C64] The deep snow in *Arctic Antics* can be fatal unless you have snow shoes on.



» [C64] The tail-end of the winner's spaceship in *Arctic Antics* teases an undeveloped sequel: *Spies In Space*.

» [C64] You need to warm up in igloos in *Arctic Antics*, and it makes you a sitting duck.



» [Game Boy] *Operation Boobytrap* has traps that you can jump past.

observes. "I think the 'jumping' in *Operation Boobytrap* was Kemco's sense of advancing the gameplay, and perhaps it was what its Japanese audience would be more familiar with."

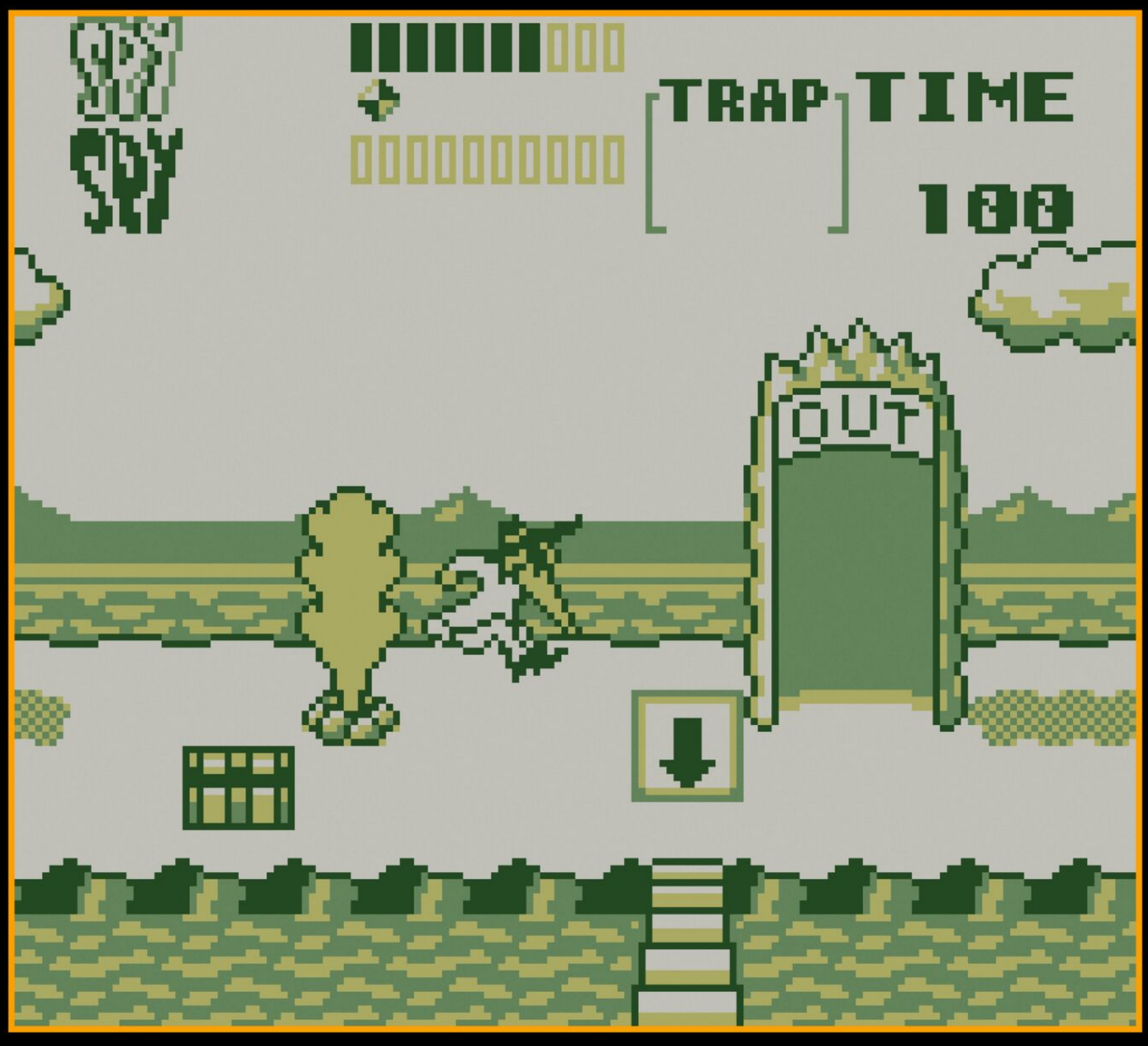
Further tweaks to the *Spy Vs Spy* formula followed, such as the spies being able to jump past certain traps, which Richard agreed to since Kemco was funding the project. "I think that was down to a desire to give players a way out," Richard theorises. "There was a certain pride over authorship, but you had to give that up when you were working with a business partner – especially when it was making the investment. So I was always conscious of that during the approval process for *Operation Boobytrap*. I wasn't going to tell Kemco that something in the game wasn't how I did it originally."

Instead, Richard saw his role as a playtester, making suggestions only when he felt aspects of *Operation Boobytrap* didn't play well or seem fair. "I wouldn't allow things if they were too difficult or not learnable," Richard recollects, "or if the AI spy wasn't forgiving enough or human enough. So there was a delicate balance to protect what I thought was the inherent design of the *Spy Vs Spy* series. But the graphics were acceptable, and recognisable as the spies given the platform and its limitations, so I think we ended up with a pretty good product. But would I have done it differently if it had been designed in-house? Definitely."

A year after *Operation Boobytrap* was released, Richard got his chance to design a console *Spy Vs Spy* title in-house, and he decided the spies' move to the 16-bit Mega Drive required the introduction of a scheming female agent from their comic strip. "The reason we were going to do *Spy Vs Spy Vs Spy* was because there had never been *three* spies in the series!" Richard enthuses. "As always, we were trying to move things forward, and by having an overarching enemy it opened up the story significantly. The female spy wasn't as well known, but by introducing her we expanded our vision. She was a huge manipulator, and she had a robot army – 13 different types of mechanical soldiers. They weren't all bosses, some just wreaked havoc."

Besides multiple opponents and boss-fights, Richard included a wealth of platforming elements in his design and took the combat from the 8-bit originals to another level. "There were ladders, horizontal pipes for hand-over-hand and a very advanced Trapulator ▶

» [Game Boy] *Operation Boobytrap* has five unique environments where as the original games just had one each.



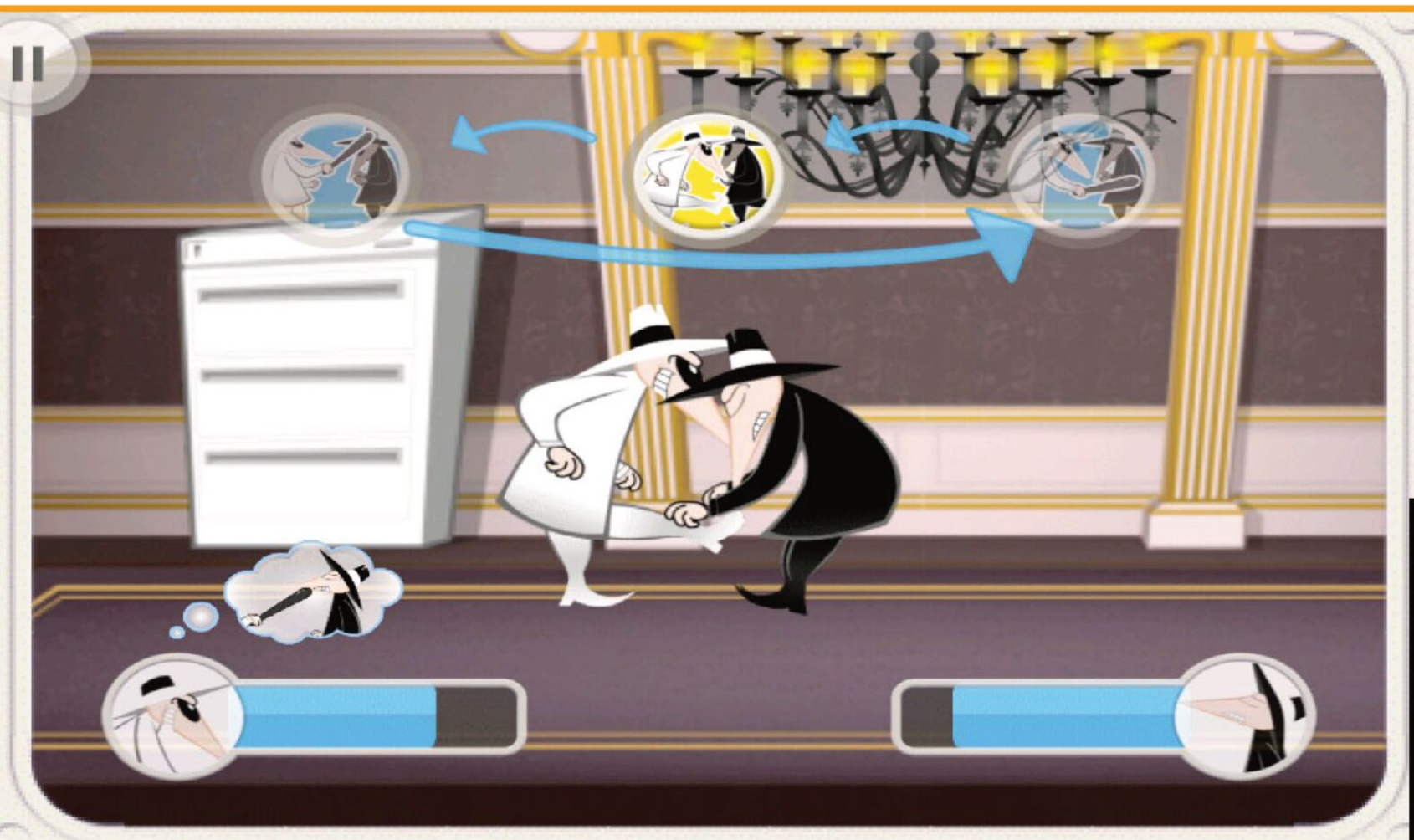
» [Game Boy] Part of *Operation Boobytrap*'s remit was to have human-like AI opponents like the original games.

» [PS2] The 2005 *Spy Vs Spy*'s 'Classic' mode faithfully reproduces the original, but it isn't suited to 3D.

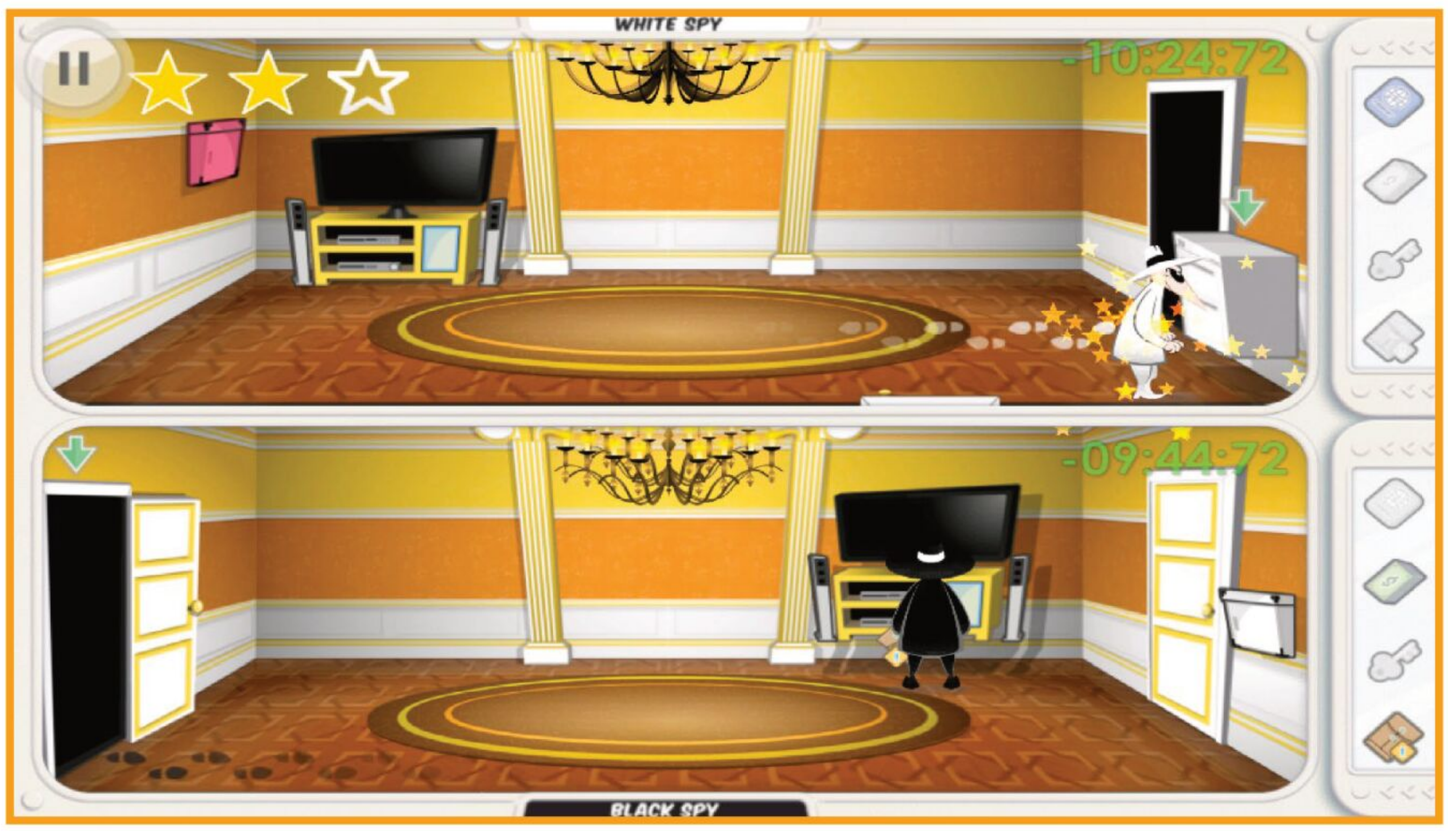
▶ with active objects, objects the player had searched but not brought into their inventory and different types of ammo," Richard remembers. "There was also combat on a flying elevator and in a gladiator-like arena, with all different moves – and it wasn't just hand-to-hand. By this point, we were expanding the combat elements of the series – where there were weapons the player could shoot. So it was definitely a progression."

Sadly, *Spy Vs Spy Vs Spy* didn't get very much further than its design, and Richard had little to do with the PS2/Xbox *Spy Vs Spy* title that came out eight years later. "I wasn't really involved at all," Richard explains. "What Global Star did was licence our game designs for *Spy Vs Spy* – Simulvision, Simulplay and the Trapulator. We didn't own the *Spy Vs Spy* name or the likeness of the characters, so my only involvement, really, was negotiating the deal with Global Star so that there were no concerns with it using our interface and designs."

To its credit, Global Star faithfully replicated the original *Spy Vs Spy* in the 'Classic' mode of its PS2/Xbox title – although it didn't work well in 3D, but its game's multiplayer mode, which the series was known for, left Richard underwhelmed. "It was very much a shooter with not enough emphasis on strategy – in my mind," Richard assesses. "Our designs for *Spy Vs Spy Vs Spy* would have been what I would have liked Global Star's *Spy Vs Spy* to have been. Yes, we advanced with the weaponry, but it was still very true to the strategy and the humour of the comic strips. For what it's worth, I would have suggested Global Star use more humour."



» [Mobile] When *Spy Vs Spy* went mobile in 2012 it added an extra combat move.



» [Mobile] The stars in the mobile *Spy Vs Spy* get you 'Mad credits,' which buy you power-ups with.

The response to the PS2/Xbox *Spy* outing was tepid, and seven years passed before the series continued with a mobile remake of the original game. Richard was back at the helm, and he decided its 'Modern' modes should have an extra combat move. "The reason there were three attacks was that we had expanded the combat so that it took place in a full-screen – which was something I had always wanted to do!" Richard beams. "Then once we did that I felt it would be more fun to have more attacks. So that's why we expanded those. As to why we didn't just go crazy, well weapons would have had to have been supported by a touch-screen, and we struggled enough getting the game onto touch-screen devices."

Another new element in the *Spy Vs Spy* mobile update was the goal of collecting stars to buy useful power-ups with – although Richard is fuzzy on the details. "I don't remember what you got in return for the stars," Richard concedes, "but my guess is that they translated into currency of some sort. Unfortunately the game's not available, so I'm not able to playtest it. But I think it was because it was a mobile experience, and that collecting them gave you a reward."

The original trilogy, however, is still fresh in Richard's memory, and it's those games that he focuses on when asked to review the *Spy Vs Spy* series. He also has some interesting ideas for further instalments. "I think the originals hold up pretty well," Richard reflects. "When I look back at *Spy Vs Spy*, it really epitomises what First Star tried to do, which was to be innovative. So Simulvision, Simulplay, the Trapulator – I'm proud of those. As for future games, I can envisage an augmented reality *Spy Vs Spy*, maybe in famous places – like Times Square or the Eiffel Tower. But since I'm retired it's not going to be coming from me, unless someone asks me to help, which I would love to do!"

"Our designs for Spy Vs Spy Vs Spy would have been what I would have liked Global Star's Spy Vs Spy to have been"

RICHARD SPITALNY

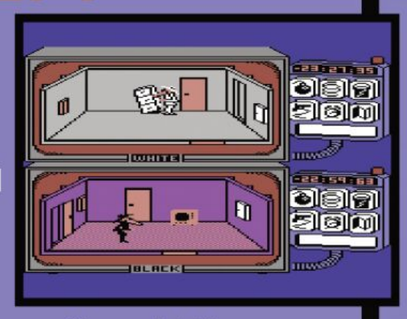
-22:57:11

STAGES OF EVOLUTION:

HIDE AND SEEK

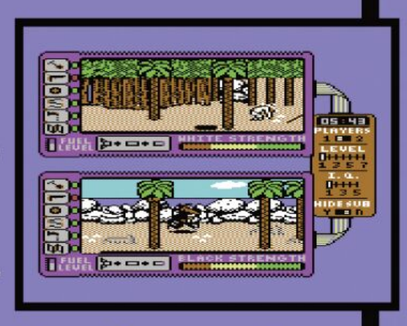
FROM SEARCHING FURNITURE AND COMBING BEACHES TO TREASURE CHESTS

SPY VS SPY



Pretty much anything in *Spy Vs Spy* can be used to hide things in, under or on. As well as office furniture like safes and filing cabinets, there are TVs, paintings and even first-aid kits that you can use to stash traps, their remedies and the objects that you need to escape with.

THE ISLAND CAPER



In *Spy Vs Spy*, certain furniture and fixtures accommodate traps and mission-related items, and others store trap remedies. But you can hide or find things in *The Island Caper* pretty much anywhere where there's sand, and this makes stashing and searching for things much more random.

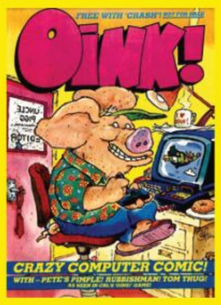
OPERATION BOOBYTRAP

As well as leaving bombs and finding documents in treasure chests, you can also set traps in much of *Operation Boobytrap*'s natural environment. Chucking coconuts up palm trees that later fall on your foe's head is fun, and bringing ceilings down on them with dynamite never gets old.

THE MAKING OF OINK!

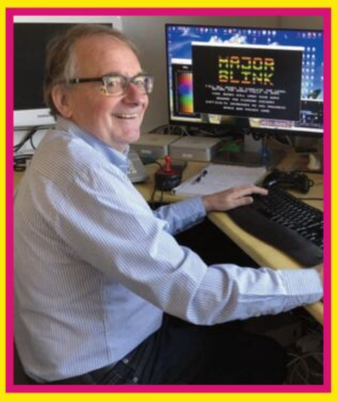
WE COULD SAY THIS VIDEOGAME TIE-IN WAS CLOSELY BASED ON THE CHARACTERS OF AN ANARCHIC COMIC CALLED OINK! WHICH MADE ITS DEBUT 35 YEARS AGO BUT, AS YOU'LL SEE, THAT WOULD BE TELLING A LITTLE PORKY

Words by David Crookes



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** CRL GROUP
- **DEVELOPER:** JON WILLIAMS
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **PLATFORM:** C64, ZX SPECTRUM, AMSTRAD CPC
- **GENRE:** ACTION



» Creator of the *Berks* trilogy and writer of *Oink!*, ^Jon Williams.

The editor of the controversial comic *Oink!* was a pig. Uncle Pigg to be exact. He oversaw 68 issues between 3 May 1986 and 22 October 1988, providing kids with a swill of satire and toilet humour that put it as far apart from the *Beano* and *Whizzer And Chips* as you could possibly get.

With anarchic characters such as Weedy Willy, Psycho Gran, Billy's Brain, Mr Bignose, Burp The Smelly Alien and The Street-Hogs, *Oink!* revolutionised the comic landscape. There were photo-led strips, crazy ads called madverts and parodies galore. WHSmith didn't know what to do with it, eventually consigning the publication to the top shelves where kids couldn't reach it.

Now, of course, there were some human minds behind this rebellious creation, chief among them the comic's founders Tony Husband, Patrick Gallagher and Mark Rodgers. After their proposal for a kids' version of *Viz* was accepted by publisher IPC, they attracted some amazing cartoonists including Lew Stringer, David Haldane and Jeremy Banks. There were contributions, too, from a 15-year-old Charlie Brooker and Chris Sievey's papier-mâché persona, Frank Sidebottom.

Setting *Oink!* apart was ambition. The first issue of the glossy comic had a free flexi-disc music single (with an appropriately ridiculous name) on the cover. A mug, T-shirt and follow-up single were released too. *Oink!* also decided to have a tie-in videogame so it contacted publisher CRL which, as it happens, had been talking to coder Jon Williams – creator of the *Berks* trilogy of C16/Plus games for CRL – about programming games for the Commodore 64.

» [C64] Mary Lighthouse – a parody of the conservative activist – appears in one of the comic strips you piece together. Note the looming deadline.

"He called me on 15 September 1986 and asked if I'd consider writing a game based on *Oink!*," Jon says. "I went up to London three days later and I was handed lots of photocopies. I hadn't read the comic previously but we had a general discussion about the possible scenarios."

The idea was to create a game around the premise that Uncle Pigg had many empty pages for the next issue despite a looming deadline (set as 7 July – Jon's birthday). "The budget for the game was pretty small so it had to be written as quickly as possible," Jon says. "I decided to create three minigames and link into the idea of creating a comic that the player could read. Ian promised some input from the team behind *Oink!* which we could add at a later stage."

Jon quickly had a framework of the game in place but Ian left CRL a month later and, without a firm commitment to continue, work slowed. "I think I restarted work early in 1987," Jon says. "I know I spoke to Tony Husband on the phone to discuss plans but I can't remember how the three minigames were decided, only that I created all of the graphics and level maps using my own editors and lots of coloured pencils and paper."

Three characters were chosen to help save Uncle Pigg's bacon: Pete's Pimple, Rubbishman and Tom Thug. By launching each minigame, players would earn points and begin to fill the comic's blank pages with strips. Yet disappointingly, each strips' panels would be simply coloured

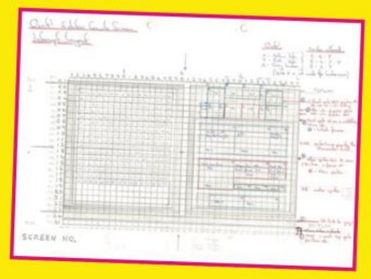
DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

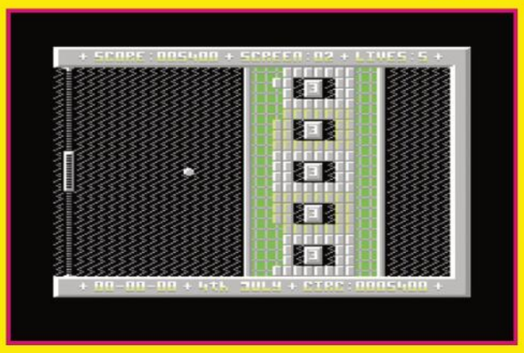
JET-BOOT JACK
SYSTEM: ARCADE
YEAR: 1976

BERKS
SYSTEM: COMMODORE 16, PLUS/4
YEAR: 1985

NEUTRALIZOR (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: COMMODORE 64
YEAR: 1989

» *Oink!*'s main editor screen was complicated. This document shows the location of the screen interrupts used to shift character sets and sprites around.





rather than contain cartoon drawings although clicking on them would reveal jokes. "We received some written text from the *Oink!* writers for inclusion in the game," Jon recalls. "I spent ages trying to format it all on the screen."

Where the game fell down, however, was that the minigames felt familiar but two certainly had very little to do with the comic. Pete's Pimple, for example, was a polished 12-screen riff on *Breakout* but if we say the character's sizeable zit replaced the ball, that's merely our interpretation.

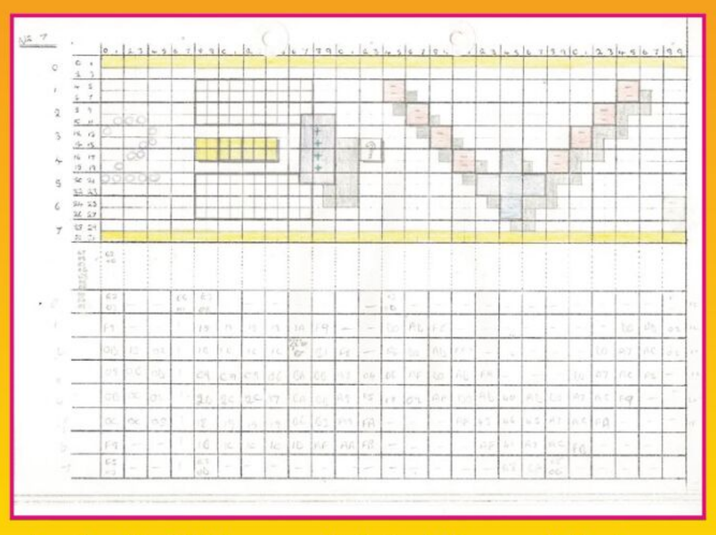
"I just fancied creating a minigame based on the classic game but with a shooting element," Jon says, of being able to blast at enemies while collecting mystery bonuses for extra panels, scores, gun shields, energy and the like.

Another minigame, Tom Thug, suffered the same fate. Here, players controlled Tom Thug's vehicle rather than the character himself, moving it across a top-down maze to find bonus blocks that would allow further progress. There were robots to shoot at and paralyse but you couldn't move and blast at the same time.

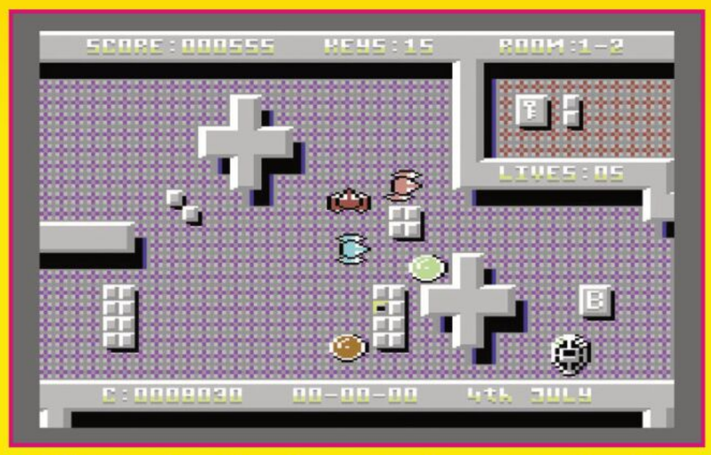
"With hindsight, the Tom Thug minigame might have been a bit of a cop out," Jon says. "It was basically a reworking of the *Berks* game I did for the C16 and I'm sure this happened because of all the delays I'd encountered. The way the Thugmobile operated would have been inherited from the C16 version which was character-based and I guess the movement stopped as it made things easier to track bullets and collision? Or it might have just been me being lazy. I honestly can't remember."

At least Rubbishman looked liked he could have flown from the comic's pages. This minigame was a horizontally-scrolling six-zoned superhero jaunt with a sprite that resembled the caped character to some degree. There would be obstacles to go over or under, bricks to smash through, energy to be obtained and rubbish to be collected. It was tricky to get the altitude correct but it was satisfyingly challenging.

"This minigame was always going to be a scrolling game to give a bit of variation but it was originally going to be more of a conventional side-scroller," Jon says. "I guess it just changed to a top-down view to be different from the scrolling games I'd done previously. I would think there was also an element of keeping the graphical style, whatever there was of it, consistent between the three minigames."



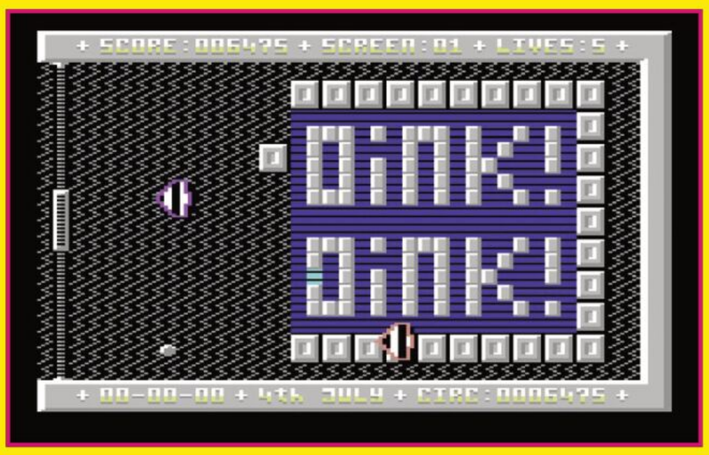
» A section of the Rubbishman map. The bottom half was used to 'hand compress' the map by entering 2 by 2 block values along with control codes for repeats etc.



» [C64] Tom Thug himself doesn't appear: instead you control the Thugmobile in this scrolling shoot-'em-up

The game was mastered at Jon's home on 6 May 1987 ("a long day", Jon says). A German version was planned and the translations were sent through but this was later canned. There were conversions for the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC, however. "It wasn't until the C64 version was nearing completion when CRL mentioned a Spectrum port," Jon says. This work was handed to other coders.

To help promote *Oink!* on the Spectrum, a 16-page comic taster was inserted inside issue 42 of *Crash* magazine and this included some type-in game listings written by Frank Sidebottom (Chris had previously written three ZX81 programs that had been released on the B-side of the 7-inch vinyl, *Camouflage*). Despite such efforts, *Oink!* didn't end up hogging the charts. "But it was such a stop/start affair, I thought it wouldn't get released," Jon says. "I'm sure it would have been more cohesive if everything had gone smoothly." *

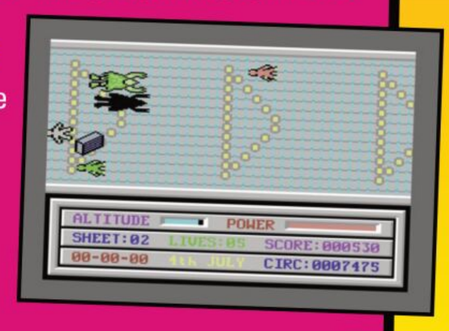


» [C64] The first level – Pete's Pimple – is a *Breakout* clone where you need to watch out for oncoming enemies.

CONVERSION CAPERS

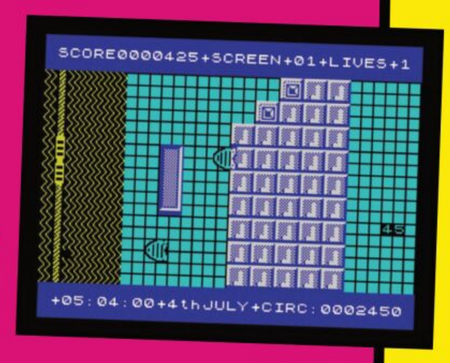
DID THE PORTS KEEP THE ORIGINAL'S 'STY'-LE?

COMMODORE 64



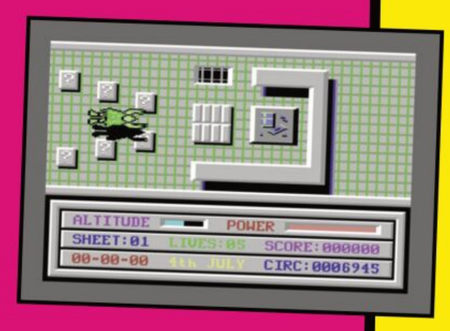
■ It took a bit of time to figure how the frontend interface worked in Jon Williams' original but being able to jump into any of the three minigames without sticking to any particular order worked in its favour. This carried through to the ports which Jon left to others. He only focussed on 6502 games and didn't want to learn a new machine.

ZX SPECTRUM



■ Jon allowed a copy of his source code to be used by Mark Incley and Robert Lees of Wise Owl Software but their Spectrum conversion wasn't entirely similar. Aside from this version losing some of the polish of the C64 original, the screens of Pete's Pimple were altered, the Rubbishman minigame felt slow and jerky, and Tom Thug looked pretty basic.

AMSTRAD CPC



■ Uncle Pigg plays a CPC in the splash screen of this conversion by Mind's Eye released in 1988 but unlike the other versions which had Uncle Pigg in the top-left corner of the strip pages, this one had none. It's otherwise a faithful, colourful and well-designed port. "I was never told about the CPC version, though, and didn't have contact with the conversion programmers," says Jon.

THE MAKING OF THEY $TOLE A MILLI

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE THEY STOLE A MILLION, THE 8-BIT CRIME CAPER GAME THAT ASKED: DO YOU THINK YOU'VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A CRIMINAL MASTERMIND? RETRO GAMER STEADIES ITS PICKLOCK AND STUDIES THE PLANS BEHIND THIS UNUSUAL STRATEGY GAME

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** 39 STEPS (ARIOLASOFT)
- **DEVELOPER:** TIGRESS DESIGNS
- **RELEASED:** 1986
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC, C64 AND ZX SPECTRUM
- **GENRE:** STRATEGY/ CRIME CAPER

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

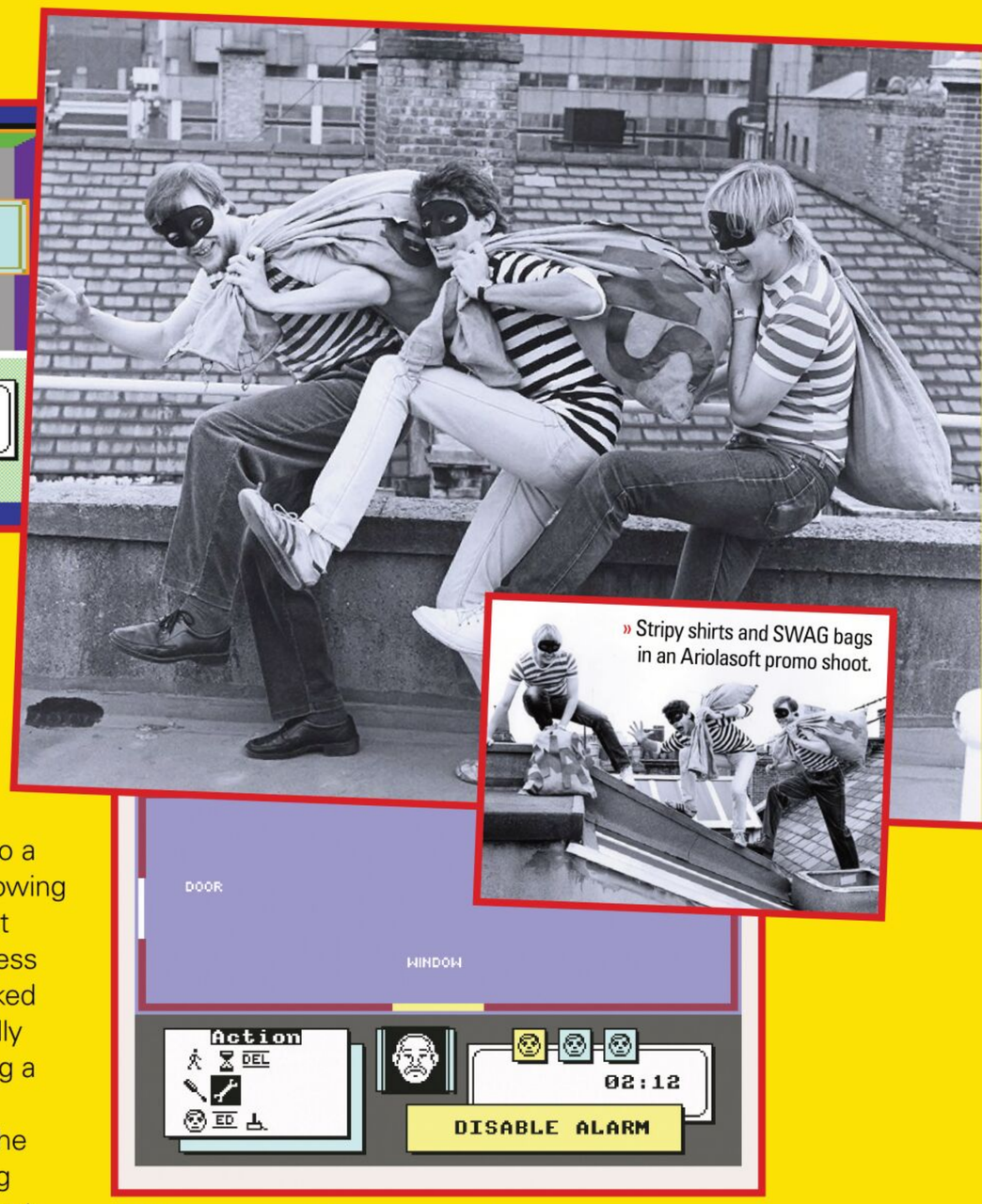
THINK!
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, ZX SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1985

DEACTIVATORS (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, C64, ZX SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1986

ZIGGURAT
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, C64, ZX SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1987

OLE ON

» [Amstrad CPC] The boss is helping out his gang at the coin dealers.



» Stripy shirts and SWAG bags in an Ariolasoft promo shoot.

» [C64] If you want to avoid unnecessary attention from the law, make sure you disable any alarms.

Founded in 1985 at the height of the 8-bit commercial years, Tigress Designs was a novel concept even at a time where originality in gaming was still very common. The idea was as simple as it was ingenious: this feline developer didn't code games, it came up with the design before employing a programming partner to complete its vision with the backing of an amenable publisher. Explains Tigress' Chris Palmer, "We also stayed involved with the team during development and would do a lot of the play testing at the end." Having already fostered an excellent relationship with Ariolasoft thanks to games such as *Think!*, *Deactivators* and *Golf Construction Set*, Tigress looked to build on its impressive roster with another inventive and compelling piece of software.

"It was quite often a plate-spinning exercise to keep all developments on track," recalls Chris, half of the Tigress team on what would become *They Stole A Million*, alongside David Bishop. "We were both pretty much involved with all aspects of the game, and usually had a few games at various stages of development at any one time." Tigress prided itself on the uniqueness of its designs and for *They Stole A Million*, its inception came from a mere play on words. "If memory serves, the whole game started out as a pun," recalls Chris. "At the time, compilations were all the rage and there was one getting advertised a lot called *They Sold A Million*. The game title came from that, and once the title existed, that got our minds working on how we could do a crime caper game." With complex graphics showing chase scenes and shoot-outs unlikely, or at best difficult to achieve on the 8-bit computers, Tigress opted for a strategy game. "Both David and I liked [strategy games]," says Chris, "and that naturally moved us in the direction of the idea of planning a heist and then watching it unfold."

In *They Stole A Million*, the player stars as 'The Boss', a small time criminal gang leader with big time ambitions. While browsing through the latest issue of *What Crime* magazine, the boss stumbles across a fancy new computerised system known as SWAG – SoftWare For Aspiring Gangsters. Housing details of potential jobs, recruits and fences, SWAG is a hi-tech program that contains all the information an up-and-coming villain needs – for a price, of course. With an initial fund gathered, the SWAG begins with a menu detailing the various options available. Set Target allows the player to choose which particular premises they wish to ▶

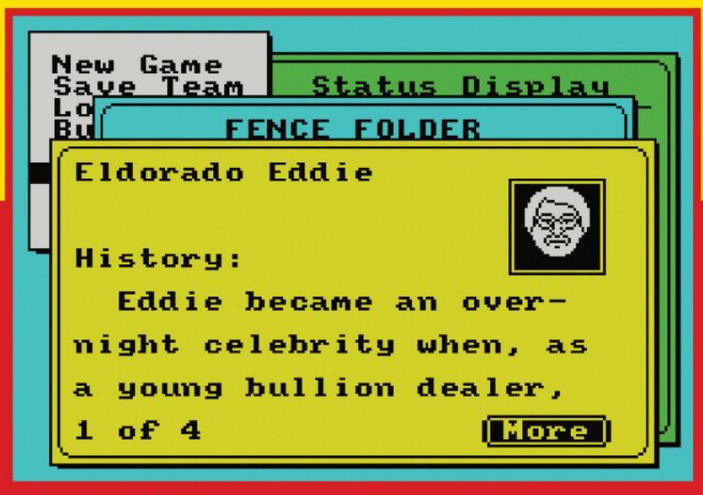
"At the time, compilations were all the rage and there was one getting advertised a lot called They Sold A Million"
CHRIS PALMER

CONVERSION CAPERS

WHICH VERSIONS STOLE OUR HEARTS?

AMSTRAD CPC

■ Over the three games, the Amstrad version just about edges it thanks to the clean, swift window system and a Ben Daglish tune that is stripped of the complexities of the Commodore 64 music, creating a toe-tapping, if somewhat beepy, adaptation of *The Sweeney* theme. More high scores followed, particularly a sweet 88% from *Amstrad Action*.



ZX SPECTRUM

■ The absence of the Ben Daglish tune makes the actual robbery sections a little on the bland side, although the Spectrum's sharp display and the lack of an opportunity for attribute clash mean it loses nothing in the graphics stakes. The window system also works well and the originality was appreciated in the press, especially *Crash* magazine with a score of 85%.

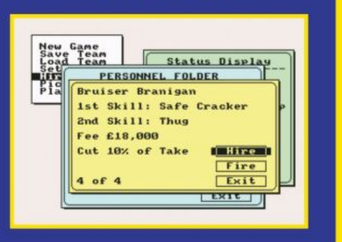
COMMODORE 64

■ While the Ben Daglish tune is chunky in places, the graphics on this original version are smart, clear and as functional as they need to be. The lack of any graphical thrills proved a sticking point to some, along with the similar level of sparseness with the audio. Nevertheless, *They Stole A Million* is one of the more endlessly enjoyable strategy games for the Commodore computer.

THE ULTIMATE HEIST

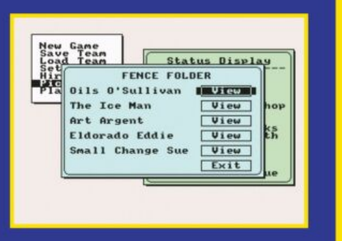
HOW TO GET AWAY WITH A FORTUNE

DA RIGHT GUYS FOR DA JOB



Picking the correct team is imperative. Every job needs a getaway driver – unfortunately the boss failed his test! Everyone can crack a safe or pick a lock (they're criminals after all), but experts use fewer seconds to get them open. With the fuzz hovering, using an expert can make all the difference.

LOSE DA LOOT

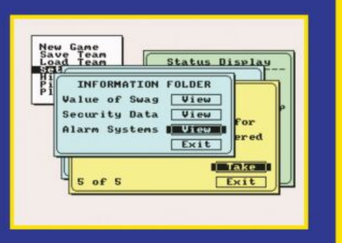


In addition to the gang members, choosing the right fence for your ill-gotten gains is a must if you want to get the most filthy lucre for your loot. For the coin dealer job, Small Change Sue is a logical choice. Need to shift some artwork? Oils O'Sullivan is the man for you.

USE DA BOSS

Once a heist has commenced, the boss (the player) can step in and assist a troubled team. Given they work for free, the boss is a valuable member of the team and a trained picklock. Don't leave yourself waiting in the car – get out there and help out!

PLAN. PLAN. AND PLAN. PART ONE



The majority of a heist is about the planning. Here, the key is the extra info that can be bought for each target, including details on value of swag and security. Even an electrical specialist can fail to disable an alarm if you haven't splashed out for the relevant circuit diagram.

PLAN. PLAN. AND PLAN. PART TWO

It's helpful to take a coding approach to the planning stage. In this segment you'll be able to pass through locked doors. However, once the job starts, this will result in a puzzled criminal wondering what to do next. Make sure you unlock and open the door before you are able to finally enter. Logical.

DON'T GET STUNG BY DA FUZZ

The police seem to randomly buzz around the towns of *They Stole A Million* so it is useful to always be on your toes. Once inside, security guards can be trapped in locked rooms or knocked out by thugs such as Mad Man Martin. Nobody messes with Mad Man Martin.

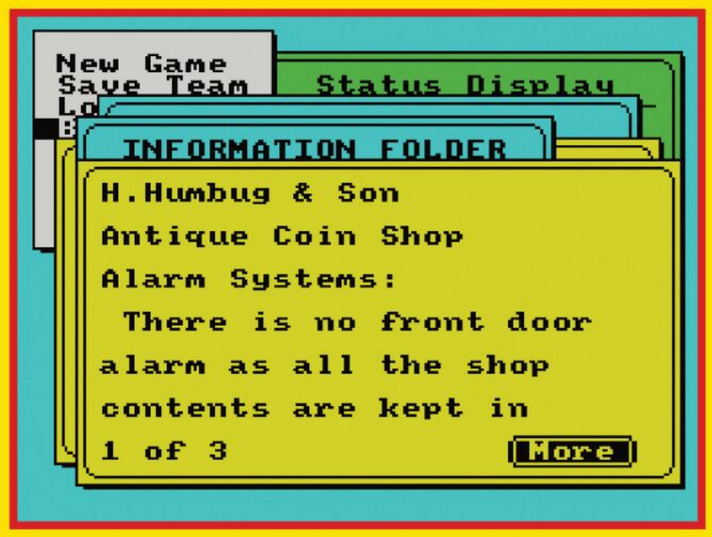
> "The notion of hiring the right team, planning the robbery and then seeing it enacted was quite original"
> **JAMES POOLE**

raid. These begin with simpler locations such as a small-town coin dealer, leading up to a bank and, the prize job, Egypt's Narburak Museum. Having purchased the blueprints of the target, the player can then buy more information ranging from the potential value of the haul, security measures and alarm systems. With all the information in hand, the boss then hires and assigns their team according to the data provided. Each hoodlum has a primary skill, followed by a secondary talent, and a history, all of which helps let the gangster discern which of his crew is the more experienced and reliable and who is more likely to do a runner when the heat is on.

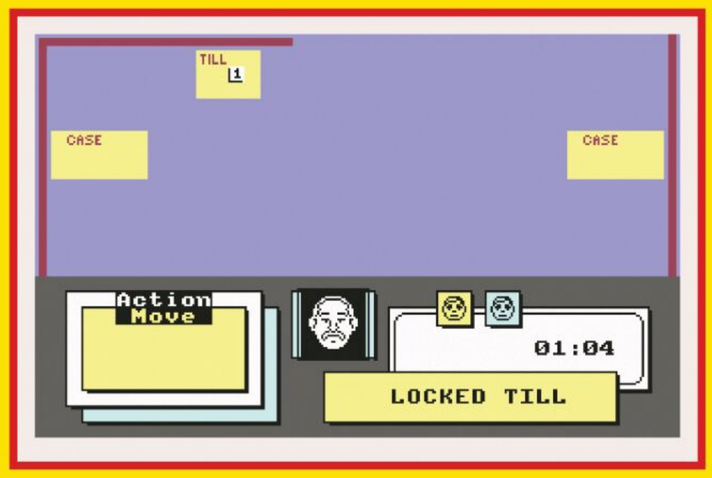
The second segment of *They Stole A Million* is where the game comes to life. Now the gang sits around a table and plans the robbery with the help of the blueprints and information bought via SWAG in the first part. The boss can select a gang member and assign them roles throughout the robbery, from smashing displays to picking locks and dealing with guards. Each move must be logically planned – forget to pick the lock and open the door before moving through it? When it comes to the real thing, the robber will stand at the door waiting patiently. Fortunately, the player can step in and help out in situations which go wrong due to poor planning. With local law enforcement constantly circling the town, the gang needs to get the job done and get it done swiftly if they are to avoid an extended stay at the big house.

While Chris and David don't recall any specific cinematic influence, the former agrees there were several examples that they drew on. "There are plenty of movies which featured the theme of assembling a team of rogues, planning the heist and seeing it unfold. Usually there's an element that has been overlooked or mucked up by a team member which jeopardises the whole operation." As with all of Tigress' work, the game was devised and planned on paper. "Reams and reams of paper!" exclaims David. "Although Chris could program, it was never to the level required to squeeze anything close to sensible performance out of the available hardware. So it was always quicker to work in the old-school way." A huge paper map, made up of many A3 pages taped together was formed for each target with doors, safes, tills, cameras and wandering guards all annotated within.

» [C64] Oh dear – caught by the fuzz.



» [ZX Spectrum] Humbug & Son is a good first job. Grab those coins!



» [C64] Locked cases and tills can either be picked or simply smashed in order to gain access to their contents.

On the publishing side, London-based Ariolasoft mixed original games such as *They Stole A Million* with the European release of Stateside products from the likes of Electronic Arts and Brøderbund. Producers Gary Yorke and James Poole were in charge of development of the Tigress game. "The game was very well-received from the outset," says James. "The notion of hiring the right team, planning the robbery and then seeing it enacted was quite original." There were still reservations, however, mainly with the final part of the game where the player became not much more than a spectator. "Luckily we had a good relationship with Ariolasoft," says David, "so I think they believed we could deliver something worthwhile. Also, you have to remember at the time that the total budget for

ROGUE'S GALLERY

TUMBLER FREDRIKS

This master safecracker and picker of locks has worked for 28 years without a single conviction. If there are locks to be picked and safes to be cracked, Tumbler's yer man. Has his own stethoscope.

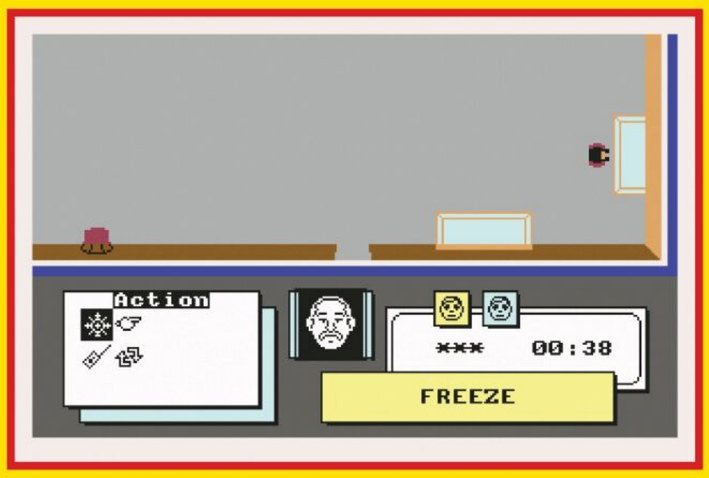
SKELETON JOE

Joe is able to pick open practically any lock, as demonstrated when he escaped Dartmoor prison using a picklock constructed from nail clippings. He can also double as a lookout.

» [C64] The heist is on!

» [Amstrad CPC] A robbery in progress. Look out for the fuzz!

» [Amstrad CPC] Once the team and fence is assembled it's time to plan the robbery to the last detail.



» [C64] Smashing up the place will quickly attract unwanted attention.

designing and developing games was a fraction of what it is now, so the risk was a lot smaller!"

Development on the game began on the Commodore 64 with Tigress working directly with the programmers. Explains Chris, "We would regularly visit the developers and would tweak the design if something wasn't working or maybe was a bit too ambitious from a technical standpoint. One of the benefits of designing on paper was that it didn't limit your imagination – but I'm sure there were more than a few developers out there who would regularly curse us for pushing the envelope a bit too far!" From the very start of the game, the intuitive interface, common today, but much rarer in the mid-Eighties, makes playing *They Stole A Million* an absorbing and instinctual experience. "The Macintosh and Atari ST had recently been released," remembers Chris, "and we were both very impressed by their GUI interfaces. So ours was definitely influenced by the software we had seen coming out on those machines."

When pitching the difficulty, Chris and David felt that the game would be targeted at a particular type of gamer. After the relative ease of the coin dealer and art gallery, the introduction of security cameras, guards and other robber-deterring systems means that exhaustive planning and thought is required to avoid getting your collar felt by the police. Says David, "We felt the game would appeal to a gamer who wasn't looking for a quick half-hour blast and was going to really feel rewarded when they came up with a great solution to a difficult level." Another massive part of the game's appeal is its immersion thanks to a series of emotive descriptions. "We wrote them between us," remembers David with a smile. "It was actually quite a fun part of the design process." From old Mr Humbug, the stuck-in-his-ways owner of the antique coin shop to Bruiser Branigan, the ex-boxer who's also a dab hand at safe cracking and the man with an 'almost pathological love of blowing things up', Mad Man Martin, each character is imbued with a real sense of personality that requires a careful selection process if the job is to be a success.

Upon release, *They Stole A Million* reviewed uniformly well across its three formats, especially on the Commodore 64, where it received a sizzling 90% score from *Zzap!64* magazine. Released under Ariolasoft's 39 Steps label ("It was a branding thing," clarifies James, "Reaktor was for action games, 39 Steps for strategy."), the only dissenting voices concerned the game's graphics. "I think we had hoped that it would a bit more impressive graphically as a lot of the building layouts ended up being a bit too spartan," says Chris. "But as ever with that generation, you were always robbing Peter to pay Paul to make things work at a reasonable speed." Nonetheless, the majority of reviewers appreciated the attempt at creating an original game despite it not quite moving at the frantic speed of shoot-'em-ups such as *Uridium* or *Dropzone*. "We were worried that the pace of the game was going to get panned," notes David, "but it was great to see most of the reviewers realise we were trying something different and give us recognition for that."

"We felt the game would appeal to a gamer who wasn't looking for a quick half-hour blast"
DAVID BISHOP

Despite the acclaim, the end was approaching for Tigress as the 8-bit market moved towards in-house studios, arcade conversions and movie tie-ins. "I don't think [*They Stole A Million*] was a best-seller," recalls Chris, "but it's nice to know it became a bit of a cult title." For Ariolasoft's James Poole, the chance to work with Tigress remains a highlight. "David and Chris created great games and I look back at *They Stole A Million* very fondly. Although there has been a remake, and a sequel to that, I still feel it's a concept that could be brought up-to-date." Chris agrees with the latter sentiment. "You could create a modern version where you essentially plan your own crime caper and then get to watch the whole thing unfold. You could have a lot of fun and post-heist arguments co-op planning a heist with friends!" Thirty-five years later, the original remains an inventive and intriguing game that presents a delightfully old school and *Italian Job*-style of lawbreaking – there are no guns in this caper. Concludes co-designer Chris Palmer, "We are very proud of everything we did back then, possibly with the exception of *A View To A Kill*. Overall we produced some innovative titles and I think *They Stole A Million* represented an interesting direction. We're pleased that we had the belief to see it through."

Tigress had time for one more game, a devious puzzle game in conjunction with a pre-*Rollercoaster Tycoon* Chris Sawyer. Released only in very limited quantities, the story of *Ziggurat* is maybe one for another time. Yet for this unique development company, its quirkiest release remains the fantastic strategy game that gives you a genuine shot at becoming Mr Big. *

THERE ARE MANY 'COLOURFUL' CHARACTERS IN THEY STOLE A MILLION. WHO'S THE MOST USEFUL, DANGEROUS AND INTERESTING?

MAD MAN MARTIN

This ex-wrestler is a useful gang member when the target includes security that needs… discouraging. Also handy with explosives but beware: both Martin and his bombs have a short fuse.

BILL WIRES SMITH

Disabling alarms is a necessity if you want to avoid getting pinched. Having honed his skills in an F1 team, Wires is an ace at ensuring there's no troublesome noise, and he can drive pretty fast too.

DETONATOR D'ARCY

Known as 'Fuse' to his friends, Detonator is the best explosives expert money can buy. He's also a good driver thanks to his love of Demolition Derby and comes with his own supply of dynamite.

Ninja Gaiden

THIS IS MY SIDE STORY

» NES » 1988 » Tecmo

When I first started to explore my interest in videogame history, one of the biggest problems that I had was having grown up in the UK. I knew that we'd had the odd change here and there – that *Lylat Wars* was *Star Fox 64* everywhere else, for example – but speaking to Americans online was truly revelatory. One of the biggest examples was learning that *Ninja Gaiden* was not the one-off cool Master System game I knew it as. In fact, I'd had another *Ninja Gaiden* game all along, the Commodore 64 version of the arcade original that had confusingly been titled *Shadow Warriors*. Do you see what I mean?

I came to learn that my Master System favourite was actually a wholly unique game in the style of the very popular trilogy of NES games – two of which actually came out here, also under the *Shadow Warriors* brand. I finally got hold of the first NES game back in 2007, as part of a lucky haul of NTSC games found in a charity shop, and it felt both familiar and totally alien at the same time. Starting off in the city streets will have made perfect sense to fans of the arcade game, but it felt odd not to be running through the forest. All of the power-up icons were totally different. But the biggest struggle was the wall jumping – the way Ryu Hayabusa clings to walls in this game is a world apart from the Master System game, which relies much more heavily on timing.

Eventually, I came to learn that *Ninja Gaiden* for the NES has plenty of what I love about the Master System game I grew up with, and I'm glad to have it. The music is very cool, Ryu controls just as well as he always did, and it even has those impossibly irritating bird enemies that seem to always be placed next to bottomless pits. It shouldn't have really been a surprise, given that the Master System game was the later adaptation, but sometimes it's easy to miss similarities when you're initially blinded by differences. ✱

FROM THE ARCHIVES

NEXUS

Nexus Productions Ltd had a limited life span, from early 1986 to December 1987. In that time, it published nine computer games, but there is much more to this publisher's story than meets the eye

WORDS BY RICHARD HEWISON

» Unique in their design, had each Nexus box used a different colour, then each release might have become more collectible.

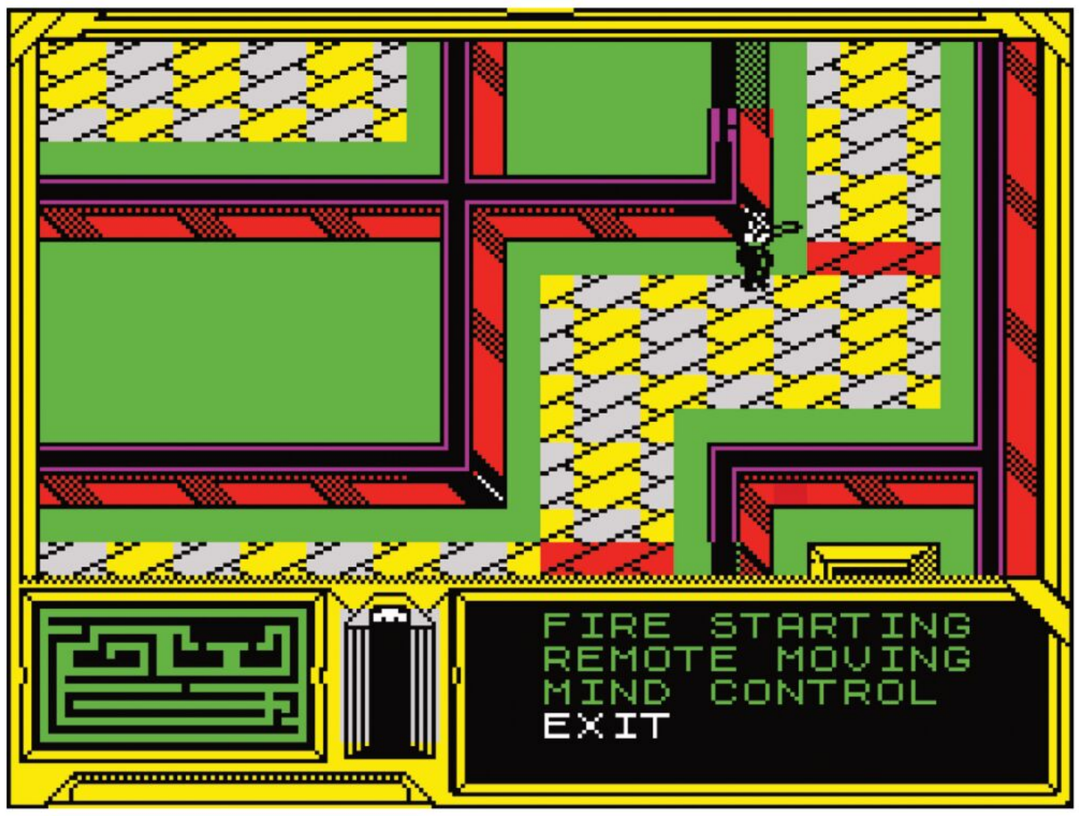
» [C64] *Assault Machine* on the Commodore 64 by Magnificent 7 Software took many influences from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*.

After gaining their engineering degrees in 1983, Paul Voysey and Tayo Olowu learned to program in machine code and wrote a sci-fi strategy game for the ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 called *Psytron*, released by EMAP-owned publisher Beyond to much acclaim in 1984.

Buoyed by that debut success, the co-authors produced a second game for Beyond called *Psi-Warrior*, a more action-oriented effort for the Commodore 64. They then began working on their next game, again for the Commodore. However, decisions made elsewhere within EMAP meant that Beyond was soon sold to British Telecom, which had its own successful software labels. BT paid a cool £1,000,000 in September 1985 for Beyond, but that decision came like a bolt out of the blue to Bill Delaney, who was running Beyond at the time.

Paul and Tayo were not at all happy with the situation, having concerns over the implications of the sale. They did not have to switch allegiance to BT, and so they chose to continue developing their new game called *NEXUS* independently and find a publisher later on.

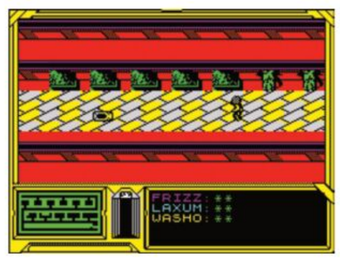
Much like his fellow colleagues at Beyond, Bill was equally unhappy at the prospect of moving over to BT and so he and Clive Bailey concluded



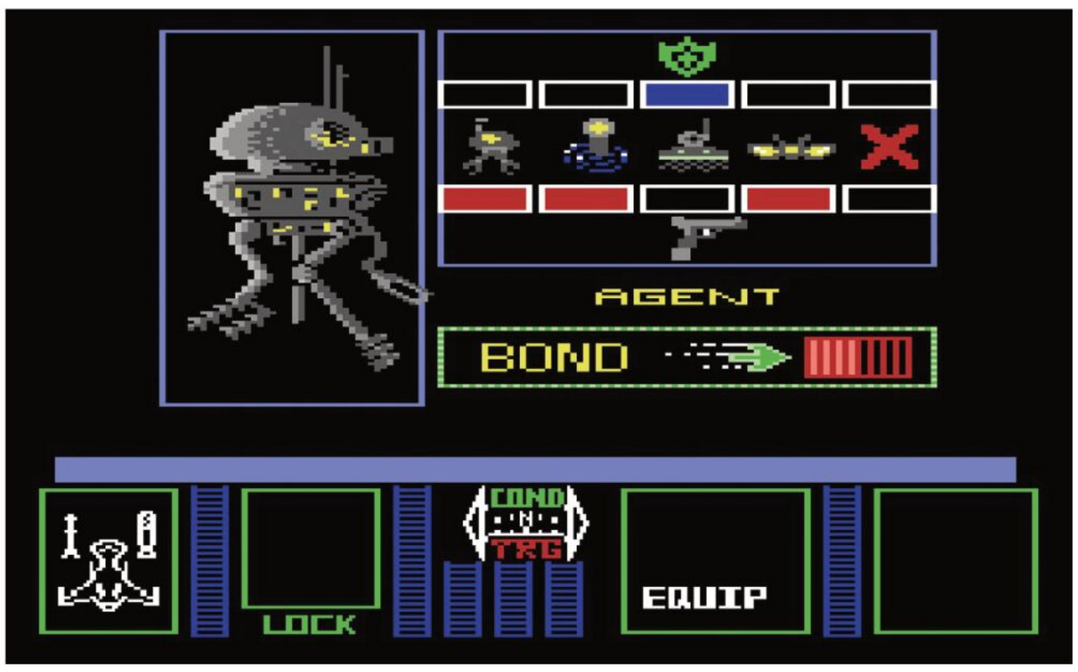
that working for BT was not what they wanted. "I always had a vision of becoming a publisher," says Bill. "Getting involved with Beyond and eventually running the company was a fast-track to that goal."

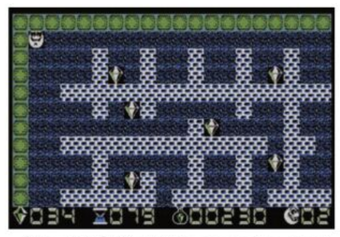
With the connections he had within the games industry, Bill began to view the situation thrust upon him in a different light and saw it as an opportunity to start his own business, realising that he could help Paul and Tayo to publish *NEXUS*. "I approached Paul and Tayo once it was clear they were not going to deal with BT, and I asked if I could help market their new game. I had a fair amount of leverage in sorting advanced orders, which ended up funding everything during the game's development period," says Bill. He also intended to use a North American agent to license US games for marketing in the UK and Europe. That initial idea quickly evolved into Bill, Clive, Paul and Tayo forming a new publishing company called Nexus Productions Ltd.

With Paul and Tayo's programming skills and Bill and Clive's marketing and sales experience, they felt they had the proper skills to make the proposition work, but what about the company



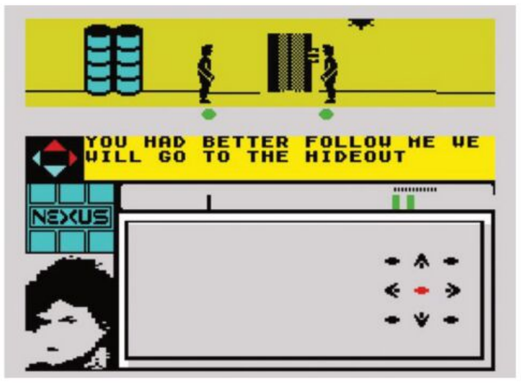
» [ZX Spectrum] *Firestorm* on the Spectrum was rushed out unfinished, with the final incomplete 12th level of the game made deliberately inaccessible to players.





» [Atari ST] *Skull Diggery* on the Atari ST was a blatant clone of First Star's *Boulder Dash*.

» [C64] The main character sprite in *NEXUS* was based on footage of Beyond's Francis Lee, running and performing martial arts moves.



» [ZX Spectrum] The ZX Spectrum conversion of *NEXUS* suffered in comparison to the Commodore 64 original and the impressive Amstrad CPC version.

name? Paul and Tayo were already calling themselves Nexus long before Bill and Clive left Beyond. "It wasn't a given that the company would be called Nexus Productions, but it just felt like the right name," says Bill. "I don't recall any massive discussions about alternatives."

Bill and Clive left Beyond just weeks after the company was sold to BT, and Bill's first task was to seek funding and source an office. He found rented offices in nearby Beckenham and set to work. "I got together my own funding from people I knew, and I was also talking to people regarding game licences, so there were plenty of opportunities," he tells us.

Nexus received backing from UK distributor CentreSoft, which did not have any equity in the company, but had first rights on anything produced, with Bill pre-selling most of Nexus' early products. He also began engaging with other developers, and a series of coincidences lead to the formation of Paranoid Software as Nexus Productions' in-house development team, as Darren Melbourne reveals. "I had somehow managed to get *Computer Trade Weekly* delivered to my home," he tells us. "I read it religiously with a strong desire to get into the videogame industry. This particular weekend I'd read in *CTW* about Nexus. On the Sunday I went to pick up the Sunday papers for my dad, and on my way back I walked past a guy cleaning a white Jaguar XJS. I said hello and he looked up and it was Bill Delaney, who I recognised from the article in *CTW*. It transpired that he lived less than 200 metres from my home in Kent."

Seizing the opportunity, Darren thought quickly and introduced himself whilst Bill continued washing his car. "I said, 'My name's Darren Melbourne and I'm going to make a games company. Can I talk to you?,' and that was it. I met Bill three or four times after that. I literally wrote down on the back of an envelope what I thought our team would need to build a range of games, and he agreed to let us work out of his offices and fund us."

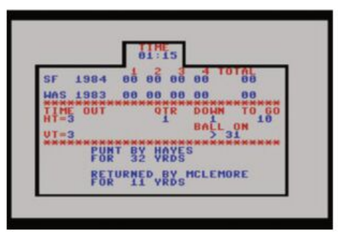
Three months after that chance encounter, Darren, along with teenage friends Mark Greenshields and Ned Langman, turned up in the Beckenham office and began working on Paranoid Software's debut game, an arcade shooter called *Hades Nebula*. "It was the classic scenario of turning up to the office in the morning and clearing out all the Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes," recalls Bill Delaney, laughing at the memory of having a group of teenagers encamped in the office. "Great days, and fun times."

"We were effectively taken on as their internal dev studio," adds Darren. "So, as well as writing *Hades Nebula*, we were working on a whole batch of other things as well." In the early days of the company, Darren was expecting Paul Voysey and Tayo to be overseeing their work, whilst Bill and Clive concentrated on the sales and marketing side. "I was really impressed with Paul and Tayo," says Darren. "We were a bunch of scatty 18-year-old kids really who didn't have a clue, and Paul and Tayo would turn up in a sports car, dressed like they were going to a country club. They were who I was aspiring to be, whilst I was dressed all in black like a teenage goth!"

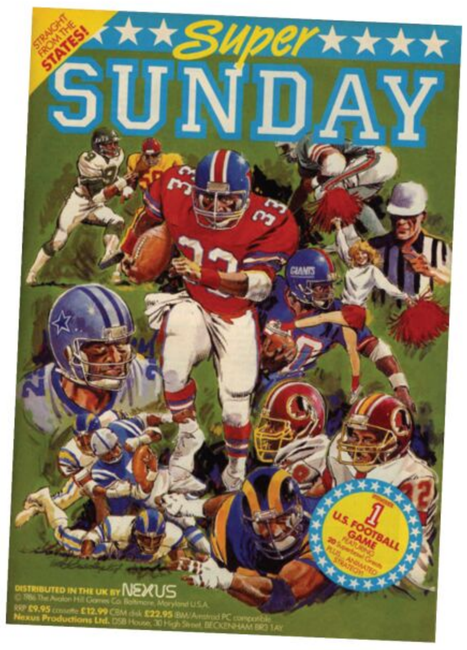
However, any expected mentoring from Paul and Tayo failed to materialise, as Darren explains. "Looking back, I don't think they really wanted to be games programmers. They didn't seem to know what was going on in the company they part owned. To us, it felt like Clive and Bill were really running things, and Paul and Tayo were along for the ride. I only saw Paul and Tayo maybe half-a-dozen times in those first three months and they never worked from the office. They would literally turn up for 20 minutes and then go. Our interaction with them was miniscule."

US Gold took on early titles including *NEXUS*, *Assault Machine* and *Warrior II* (the latter two being written by Magnificent 7 Software) to sell in France, Germany and Spain, with those versions supplied in standard double-cassette crystal cases, rather than the distinctive chunky hinged

> "I HAD A FAIR AMOUNT OF LEVERAGE IN SORTING ADVANCED ORDERS, WHICH ENDED UP FUNDING EVERYTHING DURING THE GAME'S DEVELOPMENT PERIOD"
>
> **BILL DELANEY**



» [C64] *Super Sunday* from Avalon Hill was the only game Nexus imported from abroad, for the Commodore 64 and IBM PC.



TIMELINE

1984

■ Paul Voysey and Tayo Oluwu write *Psytron* for the ZX Spectrum, published by Beyond Software. *Psytron* sells over 50,000 copies and is a huge success. They then write the Commodore 64 conversion themselves.

1985

■ Paul and Tayo's new Commodore game for Beyond called *Psi-Warrior* is published. They change their company name from 'Psy-Psi' to 'Nexus', based on the title of their next game. BT buy Beyond Software from EMAP in late September, and Paul and Tayo choose to look elsewhere for a publisher.

1985

■ Beyond's publisher Bill Delaney and marketing manager Clive Bailey leave Beyond soon after the sale to BT to set up a new marketing venture.

1986

■ Nexus Productions Ltd is formed, with Bill, Clive, Paul and Tayo becoming directors. A deal is struck for US Gold to publish and distribute select Nexus titles in France, Germany and Spain.

1986

■ Paranoid Software becomes the in-house development team and begin writing *Hades Nebula*. *NEXUS* is published for multiple formats, followed by *Assault Machine*, *Super Sunday* (imported from America) and *Warrior II*. In the UK, each cassette version is released in a unique, chunky plastic case.

1987

■ Bill and Clive become involved in new marketing company Target Action. They resign as directors of Nexus, handing control over to Paul and Tayo. The future of Nexus Productions is uncertain.

1987

■ Ian Ellery joins Nexus from CRL. Nexus sign *Firestorm* then Pete Cooke's *Micronaut One*, both for the ZX Spectrum and *Skull Diggery*, for the Atari ST.

1987

■ Nexus sign a distribution deal with Electronic Arts. Paranoid produce Blitz for the Commodore 64, but soon after Paul and Tayo put Nexus Productions Limited into voluntary liquidation, citing lack of funds.

1988

■ A liquidator is appointed and Nexus Productions closes after publishing nine titles in two years.

HADES NEBULA
CASUALTY
A REALLY FAST CHALLENGING SHOOT-EM-UP
REQUIRING A-1 VISION TO APPRECIATE THE FANTASTIC GRAPHICS (ALL FORMATS) AND EVEN PARALLAX SCROLLING ON THE SPECTRUM!.
AWESOME STAMINA IN THE FIRE-BUTTON FINGER...
BRILLIANT DEXTERITY TO DODGE ALL THE NASTY AND PESKY BADDIES...
WHAT THE CHEEKY CHAPPIES FROM THE PRESS SAID...
"...We've got the akurate quote!... Huge Lackie – Commodore Abuser.
"...We've got the first quote!... Julio Bignall – KKRAP! 67.
"...Brilliant... Stunning...Cor...Amazing Wow ...Double Wow...What's it called?..." Tom Mitcroft – Computer & Video Nastie.
"...Zip, Whee, Ping, Blip, Ping, Beep'..." Dick Eddie – TRASH!
"..." Anne Non – Proper Con Weakly.
"...Blib, blab, blobble, grunt!... Dill Baloney – Nakzus.
BUT DON'T TAKE OUR WO
RUSH ALONG TO YOUR SOF
RETAILER, AND GET A LO
A PARANOID SOFTWARE GAME B
NEXUS
COMMODORE £9.95, SPEC
and ATARI ST £19.95, all vers
MAIL ORDER: NEXUS PRODUCTIONS LTD., DSB
BECKENHAM, KENT BR
(CHQ/PO ONLY, PAYABLE TO NEXUS P
HADES NEBULA
NEXUS
SPECTRUM

» Utilising his obvious artistic skills, Ian Ellery saved Nexus some advertising costs by drawing the advert for *Hades Nebula* himself.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

BILL DELANEY

Bill's decision to move to marketing business Target Action just a year after helping set up Nexus Productions meant that he left the games publishing industry for good in 1987, never to return. Almost 35 years later, he has now taken stock of his involvement, saying, "I've never looked at what has happened to the industry and the market since. It's almost like the next time I looked, everyone owns a games machine!"

DARREN MELBOURNE

After Nexus, Darren became prolific, founding or cofounding numerous development studios, with some later bought by Square Enix, Rock You and Warner Brothers. He was European third-party development director for THQ and Ubisoft, and has also held the position of global licensing director for Eidos/Square. Darren cofounded Playdemic, which created *Gourmet Ranch*, *Village Life* and *Golf Clash*. He has been involved in designing and producing over a hundred products in the past three decades, including versions of *The Addams Family*, *The Lion King*, *Populous*, *Sensible Soccer*, *Speedball*, *Kick Off*, *Doctor Who*, *Puzzler World* and *Golf Clash*. Most recently Darren was a founding member of game streaming service Antstream and also cofounded Retro Games Ltd, which created THEC64 Mini, THEC64 and THE VIC20.

plastic boxes used for the UK. Nexus Productions appeared to have a fairly strong line-up, but less than a year later, another business opportunity came before Bill and Clive that they found hard to ignore.

"I was shown a particular type of direct marketing product called Target Action, which was another publishing venture which I then bought into," says Bill. Darren Melbourne and his friends knew little about what was going on, but Darren remembers sensing a change in focus from Bill and Clive, as Paranoid Software continued to work on *Hades Nebula* for the Commodore 64. "I saw Bill and Clive in the office a lot in the first three or four months, and then literally nobody turned up. Bill and Clive just stopped coming because they were concentrating entirely on Target Action," he says.

Bill's new business became a dominant distraction, with him admitting years later that the new venture rapidly began to take priority. "It started to gain some significant traction and so I approached some venture capitalists, but one of their conditions was that I had to go full-time. Obviously, that gave me a massive dilemma, as this new opportunity was just too big for me to let go."

The implications of what happened next were to be huge for Nexus. Bill signed the office lease over to Paul and Tayo, then he and Clive Bailey resigned as directors, leaving the company without any sales or marketing expertise. Bill then spent the next

> "OUR RIGHTS TO THE GAME WERE NON-EXISTENT AND WE HAD NO CHANCE OF GETTING IT BACK TO DO ANYTHING WITH IT"
>
> DARREN MELBOURNE

two years in Germany, leaving the games software industry far behind him. Bill believed that Paul and Tayo wanted more control over their own products and so he personally felt comfortable leaving them to take the business forwards.

It was around this time that a new face appeared in the Nexus office, with former CRL Software development manager and creative director, Ian Ellery joining. "After Bill and Clive started on Target Action, our working relationship became exclusively with Ian Ellery," remembers Darren Melbourne. "Looking back, Ian was basically left to run the ship."

The in-house developers and recent recruit Ian Ellery soon found themselves in a difficult situation. They continued to turn up at the Beckenham office, but the alarm bells should have been ringing. Unfortunately, Paranoid Software was not living up to its name, remaining idealistically optimistic that everything would turn out fine. "We naïvely expected them to roll on and fund the next project," remembers Darren. "We ended up working out of that office for another eight months because it was paid for, but nobody else ever turned up."

Despite the uncertainty, Nexus published a handful of other titles. *Firestorm* for the ZX Spectrum was followed by *Micronaut One* from programmer Pete Cooke. That game was an idea

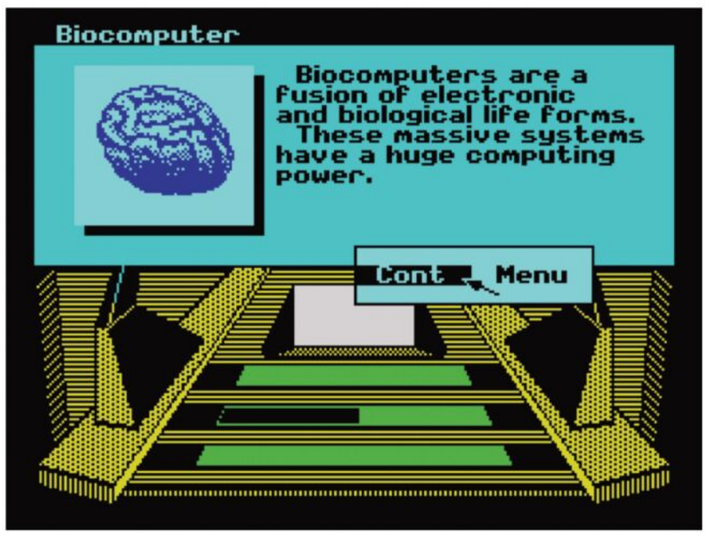
DNA OF NEXUS PRODUCTIONS LIMITED

NEXUS

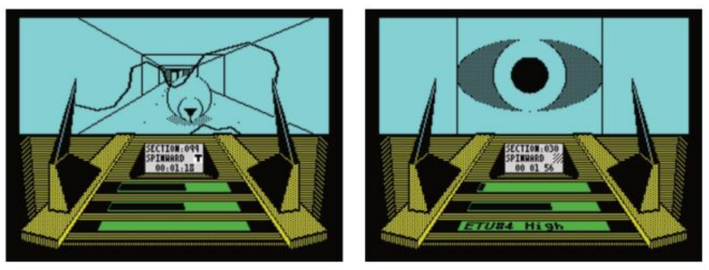
NEXUS was not only the title of their new Commodore 64 game, but it also became Paul Voysey and Tayo Oluwu's own development team name. It then became the name of their new publishing company. *NEXUS* the game was also converted by Pennsoft to the Amstrad CPC and ZX Spectrum.

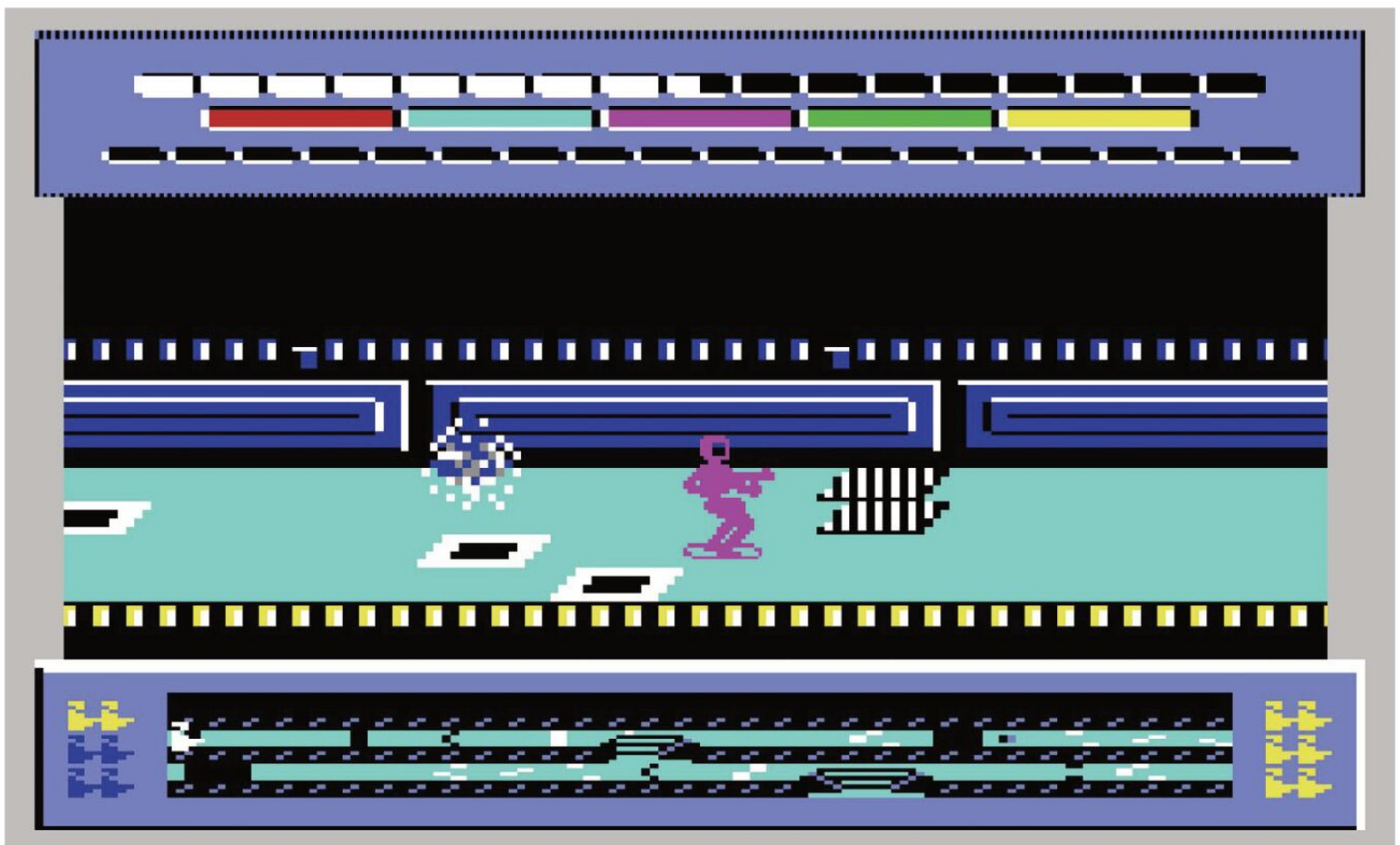
CONNECTIONS

Industry connections were significant for Nexus Productions. Bill Delaney's North American contacts got them *Super Sunday* from US publisher Avalon Hill. Ian Ellery's contacts got them *Micronaut One* by Pete Cooke, and Bill's background at EMAP got them a European distribution deal with CentreSoft via US Gold.


Biocomputer
Biocomputers are a fusion of electronic and biological life forms. These massive systems have a huge computing power.
Cont
Menu

» [ZX Spectrum] *Micronaut One* was the highest rated Nexus published game, based on the magazine reviews that were so important for sales.





» [C64] Clive Bailey refuted that *Warrior II* was a sequel to *Psi-Warrior*, despite the box label clearly stating that the "Psi-Warrior Returns!"

that Pete had been thinking about whilst producing his last few games for CRL. His impressive 3D tunnel-racing, parasite-defeating ZX Spectrum game was technically brilliant and immaculately presented.

With *Hades Nebula* finished, and with nobody else instructing the team what to do otherwise, Paranoid Software continued to write games for the Commodore 64, including another shoot-'em-up called *Blazer*. "*Blazer* was written using the *Hades Nebula* code," explains Darren. "That was Ian Ellery's idea to generate some quick money. He asked us to reuse the code, write a new game, and repackage it. However, we pretty much knew at that point that Nexus was on its way down."

Ian gave Darren and colleagues his perspective about distribution, pre-sales of the games and why he thought Paranoid were not seeing any royalty payments from *Hades Nebula*. "He was a little older than us and was a fantastic artist and illustrator but working in that office was a very bizarre experience," says Darren. That bizarre experience extended to the Paranoid team not receiving any money once *Hades Nebula* was sent for mastering.

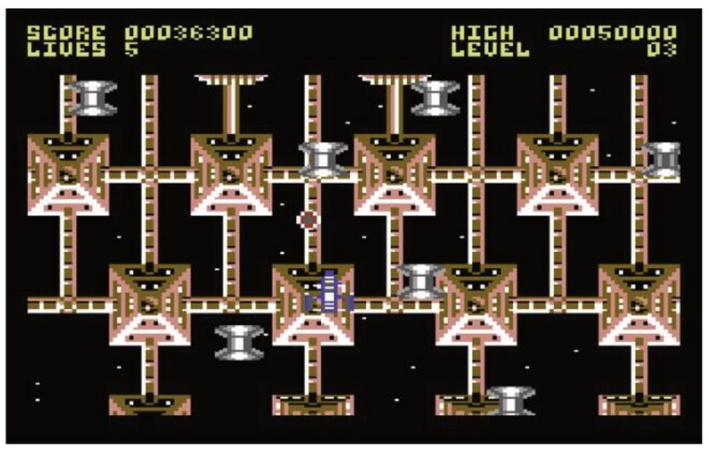
"We were told that the company was on-going, and that we should keep working, so we did until around August or September 1987, when we came in one day and Ian Ellery met us in the hallway and said that the office lease was up," continues Darren. "We quickly realised that this really was it, so we hired a van and shifted everything out. Ned Langman's nan had a spare room, so we set up in there for a couple of months while we tried continuing to work on new games *Nuker* and *Enemy*, but it never worked out."

Paranoid Software ended with the downfall of Nexus, officially revealed in December 1987 when Nexus was placed into voluntary liquidation by the two remaining directors, Paul Voysey and Tawo Oluwu. Paul was quoted in *Popular Computing Weekly*, saying the problems were related to "… historic indebtness" and that the company "… has not had sufficient money to fund a strong product line".

Earlier that year, Nexus had struck a deal with Electronic Arts, and EA's director for European distribution, John Forrest, was quoted, saying, "They were very frank with us. They came and said they'd been looking through their books and were in financial difficulty."

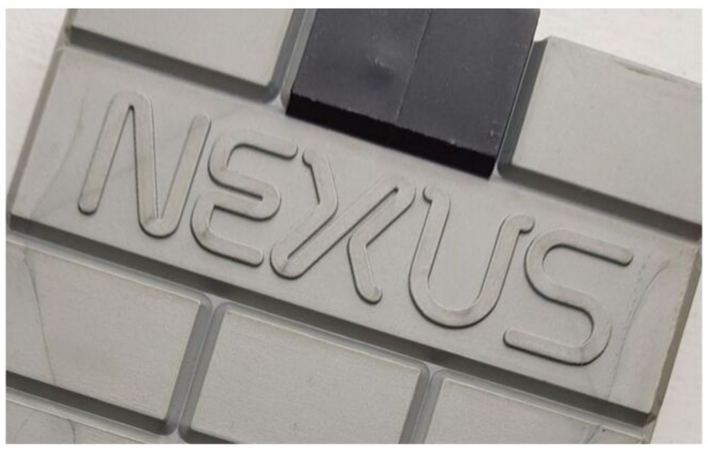
"What we discovered afterwards, when the company went into liquidation was that our game, *Hades Nebula*, had been 'exclusively' sold to several different distribution partners," says Darren Melbourne, flippantly. "That meant our rights to the game were non-existent and we had no chance of getting it back to do anything with it."

What started out as an exciting venture ultimately ended in disappointment. Nexus Productions Ltd disappeared without making the impact the founders had wanted, and the departure of two directors and the implications of what happened afterwards left the company with an uphill struggle. One or two titles withstanding, the company's legacy is probably more about the boxes than the games. *



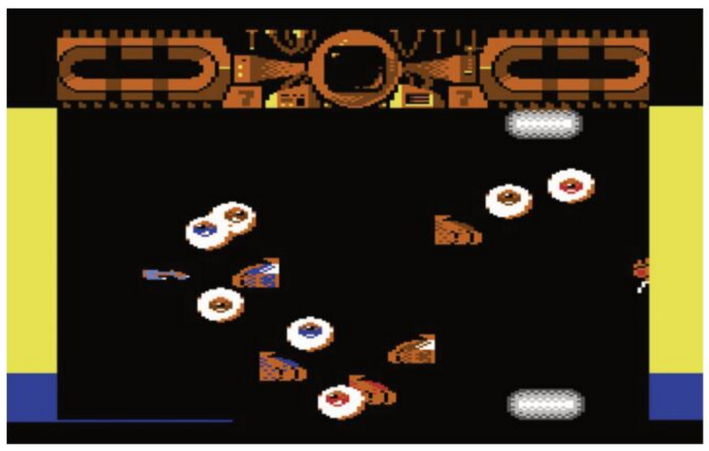
BECOMING PARANOID

■ Not only did Paranoid Software write *Hades Nebula* and *Blazer* on the C64, but it also got involved in much of the day-to-day work at Nexus, including helping playtest other Nexus releases, posting out games to customers and any other software publisher-related tasks as suggested by producer Ian Ellery.



BARS OR CUBES?

■ The first four games released on cassette by Nexus in the United Kingdom came in 'chocolate bar' or 'ice cube tray' style plastic boxes, with hinges and a clip. The boxes were unique but retailers did not like them and after Bill and Clive's departure, Nexus switched to double-cassette crystal cases.



THE UNPUBLISHED FIVE

■ Nexus would have added more games to its roster. Paranoid Software was writing three new Commodore arcade titles, called *Enemy*, *Colony* and *Nuker*. A *Marble Madness*-style clone called *T-Runner* was in the pipeline for the C64 and work had also begun on ZX Spectrum programmer Bo Jangeborg's *Resolution*.

THE UNCONVERTED

Arcade games that never made it home

TENKOMORI SHOOTING

DEVELOPER: **NAMCO** YEAR: **1998** GENRE: **SHOOT-'EM-UP**

■ Fans of lightgun games will often cite *Point Blank* as a great example of the genre, and it's easy to see why – it's packed with variety and humour, and will thoroughly test the marksmanship of any gamer. But did you know that Namco had applied the same gameplay template to traditional vertical shoot-'em-ups? It's true, and it's a bit of a forgotten classic too.

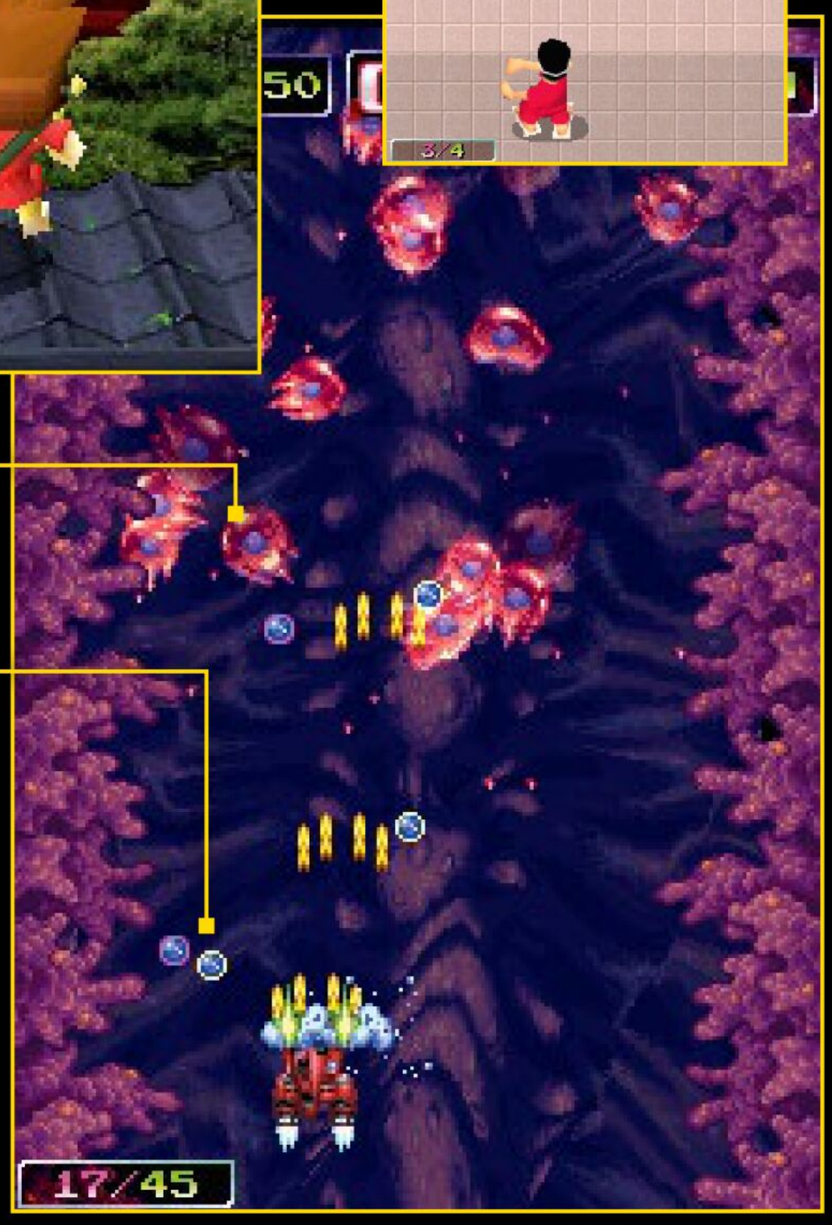
Tenkomori Shooting is a rather obscure game in which you need to get a monkey to the top of a tower – four, six or nine stories high depending on the difficulty you choose – by completing shooting minigames. On each floor, you get to choose from a few different games. One might task you with destroying a certain number of enemies, another might require you to shoot targets in a certain order, or maybe give you a limited number of shots with which to hit your target. Succeed, and you'll advance to the next floor. Fail, and you lose a life.

It's a fun game design, and just as with *Point Blank*, you'll find that the presentation adds a lot to the game. Shooting bacteria is the sort of thing you might find in biologically-themed shoot-'em-ups, sure – but how many shooters have you shooting love hearts at women, or take place in sushi restaurants? Not many, we'd wager. The notable settings actually extend well beyond the comedic and into self-referential territory too, as Namco has included stages based on its own classic shooters such as *Xevious* and *Galaga*.

Tenkomori Shooting is one of those games that really flies under the radar, and deserves to be played by a wider audience. The fact that it never got a home conversion is a crying shame – it's the sort of game that could have been handled by the PlayStation, and while it almost certainly doesn't have the appeal that *Point Blank* holds as a party game, there's always a hardcore contingent of shoot-'em-up fans to satisfy. Thanks to the game's rapid turnaround in objectives and settings, it's a welcome change of pace that should do exactly that.

■ The shogun in the back is the target here, and moves around slowly as you try to hit him with your limited supply of shurikens – you only get three.

■ These ninja guards can take two hits, so the ideal tactic is to use your first two shots to remove a ninja and create an opening to hit the shogun.



■ The goal here is to divide the bacteria into 45 pieces by shooting them. Your goal is displayed both before the game starts and in the bottom left corner.

■ Enemy bullets can kill you, but you won't lose a life. Instead, you'll just lose time to complete your objective, which is precious enough to be a problem.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

SHMUPS SKILL TEST

2007

■ There aren't many games quite like *Tenkomori Shooting* – the closest one we know is this game by Triangle Service, which similarly gives you unusual shoot-'em-up tasks. The game is available as part of *Shooting Love 200X* on the Xbox 360, and got a standalone digital release on Steam in 2016.

COOL RIDERS

DEVELOPER: **SEGA** YEAR: **1994** GENRE: **RACING**

■ **While Sega's arcade racing pedigree ensured that many of its games did come home, the company was prolific enough that some games were bound to slip through the cracks, like this motorbike racer.** The goal is simple – make sure you get to the checkpoints before your time runs out, choose your route at the fork in the road that accompanies each checkpoint, and try to reach the finish line. It feels rather like an evolution of *OutRunners* thanks to the choice of vehicles and multiple routes, though in *Cool Riders* you have three choices at each checkpoint rather than two.

What makes *Cool Riders* so distinctive is its unique aesthetic. There are quite a few locations where it feels more or less like a standard sprite-scaling racer, but when the magic carpet riders show up in Egypt, or when you realise that you're an old man riding a pushbike through a shark-infested ocean, it feels wild. Maybe even "Born To Be Wild" as the licensed title theme suggests. Unfortunately, *Cool Riders* was too much for 16-bit systems and not impressive enough next to the 3D racers on 32-bit consoles, which could explain why it never got converted.

» [Arcade] Somehow, we've made *Cool Riders* look conventional. It's not usually like this, honest.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

OUTRUNNERS

1993

■ Like *Cool Riders*, *OutRunners* doesn't take itself too seriously and offers plenty of driving routes. Unlike *Cool Riders*, *OutRunners* received a Mega Drive conversion – though to be honest, it wasn't particularly great as Sega's 16-bit machine couldn't hope to match the sheer power of the System 32 board.

CONVERTED ALTERNATIVE

DIG DUG

1982

■ Namco's hit arcade game doesn't seem to share all that many similarities with *Rumba Lumber* on the surface, but the act of claiming your territory and managing the enemy's territory gives it at least some mechanical similarity. *Dig Dug* is widely available as a standalone game and in Namco Museum compilations.

RUMBA LUMBER

DEVELOPER: **TAITO** YEAR: **1984**
GENRE: **ACTION**

■ **You're a caveman in a big old forest, and life would be great if that pesky pterodactyl wasn't always flying about.** Luckily, it only seems to fly around above trees, so you hatch a brilliant plan – get the pterodactyl to fly above only a small patch of forest, and live your life in peace. Who doesn't love a good bit of deforestation, after all? So the idea is to run around the map, chopping down trees until the pterodactyl is trapped in an area of four trees or fewer.

If you find one, you can run a stone wheel across the forest to take out a whole row of trees, but mostly you'll be chopping them down one at a time – and that's a bit of a pain because the enemies here are super aggressive. The pterodactyl can shoot fire at you, a dinosaur runs around the areas you've cleared and can also travel through the forest, and if the very fast mole shows up, you're done for. Different stage layouts with obstacles like rivers and thunder clouds liven things up as you make hard won progress, but only the most persistent gamers will take to *Rumba Lumber*.

» [Arcade] By rolling this stone wheel, we've got the pterodactyl confined to just six trees.

BEST LEFT IN THE ARCADE

POLICE TRAINER

DEVELOPER: **P&P MARKETING** YEAR: **1996** GENRE: **LIGHTGUN**

■ **This lightgun game is one of those sorts of games that isn't poorly constructed, it's just incredibly bland.** The premise of the game is that it is a training tool for police officers, and thus offers traditional shooting challenges – aiming for specific areas on a body-shaped target, or reaction tests with fast-moving targets. There are also more fanciful ones, with 'virtual' people running around and lots of balls being launched from various trajectories.

The big problem is that *Police Trainer* doesn't really embrace being a videogame. The look of the challenges is deliberately stark and unglamorous, which would make sense if the aim was realism. But by including the more fanciful elements, you're left wondering why you're shooting faceless figures instead of the sharply-dressed gangsters of the *Virtua Cop* series. As it stands you're far better off playing something like *Point Blank*, which offers the same kind of challenge as *Police Trainer* without being filled to the brim with grim, grey graphics – and with the benefit of a home version to boot.

» [Arcade] Like this caption, *Police Trainer* is rather bland so you might want to pick a different one.

SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT...

MSX GAMES

The MSX is a versatile computer system with a wide range of games available on tape, disk, cartridge and even laserdisc. Exploring its selection of arcade gems and obscure Japanese exclusives can be great fun but be warned – they come at a price!

Words by Ashley Day

PLENTY OF BRASS NEEDED

METAL GEAR

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1987

Among Konami's incredible streak of 70+ MSX releases, *Metal Gear* is one of its finest. Famously created with the system's hardware limitations in mind, it was designed as a slower paced, flick-screen game that rewarded careful planning and slow movement over action.

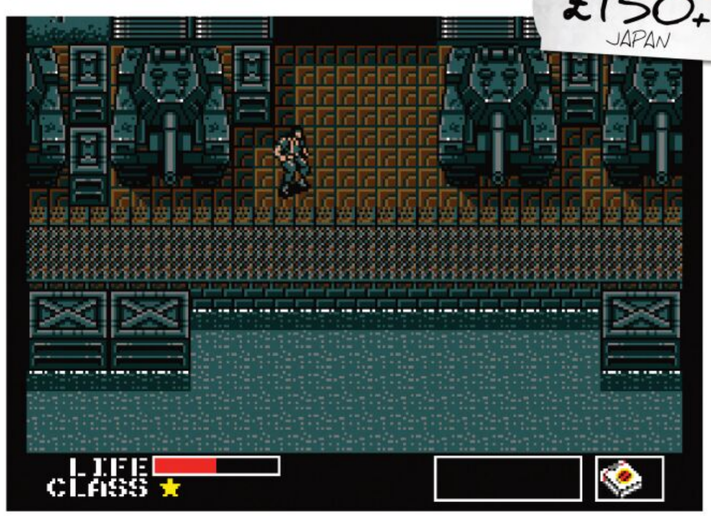
Hideo Kojima cleverly designed the game this way to sidestep the jerky scrolling of the humble MSX and in doing so he practically invented an entirely new type of game that's still deeply satisfying to play today.

Yes, *Metal Gear* is also available on the NES, and at a more affordable price, but the NES port was significantly altered with many changes, including the removal of the actual Metal Gear boss itself. With the MSX version you're getting the real, undiluted Kojima deal. If you're looking to save money, you may be tempted to go for the cheaper Japanese release, but be cautious as the Japanese version will only play on MSX computers with a kanji ROM, so if you have a PAL system it likely won't play at all. Too bad, Snake!

» [MSX] For better or worse, you won't find the "I feel asleep" line in MSX *Metal Gear*.

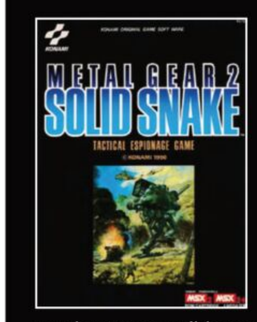
EXPECT TO PAY £250+ EUROPE

EXPECT TO PAY £150+ JAPAN



SO SOLID

Why you're better off leaving the sequel alone

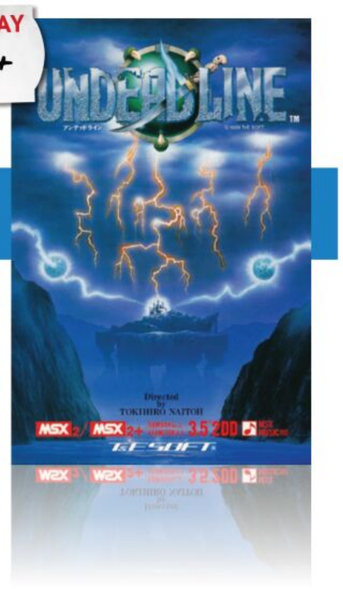


Released in 1990 at the tail end of the MSX's life, *Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake* was Hideo Kojima and the MSX firing on all cylinders with an adventure that's so rich and deep, it's a lot like playing *Metal Gear Solid* in 2D. Sadly, the MSX cart was only released in Japan and commands such high prices that it's really only worth it for hardcore collectors. For everyone else, it's much more sensible to play the version Konami added to the *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection*. Yes, they did change all the character portraits so they no longer look like famous movie stars but it is in English, costs a fraction of the price of the MSX cart, and includes the original *Metal Gear* too. So we'd call that a fair trade!

DEAD PRICEY

UNDEADLINE

EXPECT TO PAY £100+ JAPAN



DEVELOPER: T&E SOFT
RELEASE: 1989

An unusual shoot-'em-up from the developer best known for the *Hydlide* series, *Undeadline* adds light RPG elements to the mix to create a more tactical take on the genre. This is a supremely replayable shooter that puts great emphasis on choice and experimentation. The first six stages can be tackled in any order, like a *Mega Man* game, all of them featuring multiple routes and plenty of secrets. There are three playable characters who all have their own unique abilities and stats to level up, if you can find the hidden fairies in each stage. There's also a wide range of collectible powers that vary in effectiveness depending on how you've levelled your character. *Undeadline* may be a little on the expensive side but the quality and challenge give it great value.

» [MSX] The Options in *Undeadline* take the form of a different companion monster depending on which stage you're on.

» [MSX] The tough boss battles are a real highlight of *Undeadline*.

WHO YA GONNA CALL? BANK MANAGER!

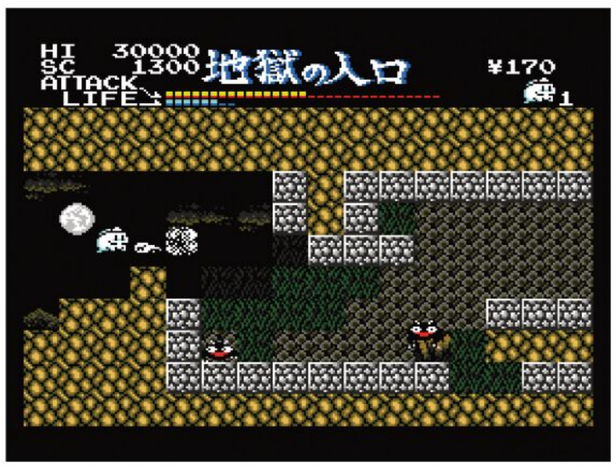
MR GHOST

EXPECT TO PAY £280+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: SYSTEM SACOM
RELEASE: 1989

Due to it never appearing on any other system and being made by a relatively unknown developer, *Mr Ghost* (or *Yuureikun* as it's known natively) is, appropriately enough, very difficult to spot in the wild. You'll need deep pockets to buy this one, and that's if you can even find it to begin with. But if you do, you'll find a unique action game that's packed full of charm.

The eponymous Mr Ghost has some very strange ways of attacking its enemies, including a projectile that kind of half homes in on enemies around you, and a weird backwards butt bash that can break blocks and the faces of bosses alike. Mr Ghost is totally unlike anything else on MSX, or any other system for that matter, and should be on any MSX collector's wish list. But, again, careful with the price it costs these days – you don't want to increase your overdraft!



» [MSX] *Mr Ghost* feels like the sort of game you might discover on the PC Engine. This is a good thing!

» [MSX] Beating a boss by bumping into it, bum first, is a surprisingly satisfying move!

ONE MAN'S JUNKER...

SD SNATCHER

EXPECT TO PAY £270+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1990

You can get the original *Snatcher* on MSX but you should really set your sights on the Mega-CD version instead. Not only is it in English, it also includes a bonus third act, way better visuals, music and lightgun controls. But *SD Snatcher*... that's exclusive to MSX, and it's awesome!

Konami's final MSX game, *SD Snatcher* took the basic plot of Hideo Kojima's excellent cyberpunk adventure and turned it into an RPG with cute 'super-deformed' character designs and a new third act that's totally different to the Mega-CD one. It also boasts a fantastic battle system that rewards precision aiming. Shoot a robot's legs off and it won't be able to dodge. Hit it in the eyes and its aim will suffer. Enemies show visual signs of damage wherever you hit them, which becomes really fun when you battle a Snatcher and start shooting off their skin to reveal the cyborg beneath!

NAME ASH LV 01 $ 00000
LIFE 016
STR 004 DEF 002 SPD 004
GOODMORNING MR. SEED. I AM THE HEAD OF JUNKER. MY NAME IS BENSON CUNNINGHAM. WELL, LET'S TALK ABOUT JUNKER NOW.

» [MSX] If you're familiar with *Snatcher*, it's a real treat to see its story retold in *SD Snatcher*.

FUN TRANSLATION

Playing SD Snatcher in English

While *SD Snatcher* has never been released outside of Japan there are two fan translations that are available online. The first of these, made by a team called Oasis way back in 1993, is even believed to be the first videogame fan translation ever made! It's a little rough around the edges but has a historical value all of its own. If you know what you're doing you could even write the translated files to real floppy disks and play them on actual MSX hardware along with the sound cartridge that comes with the official release. This writer once used an MSX emulator on the Amiga to do exactly that, which is a bit extreme but also feels kinda cyberpunk in its own way.

COLLECTING TIPS!

Choose your MSX wisely
There are so many MSX systems to choose from but if you buy an MSX2 with a disk drive, it will work with most of the best games.

Shop Japan
For the rarer MSX games, you're better off using a Japanese auction site service like Buyee. The selection is better than on Western sites and the prices are cheaper.

Sound on
If you want the best sound, invest in the Panasoft FM-PAC, a cartridge that adds the MSX Music FM chip to your system to improve the music in many games.

The joy of pads
MSX used its own two-button controllers that can be expensive to track down. It's easier to buy a fan-made adapter that allows you to use a Mega Drive pad instead.

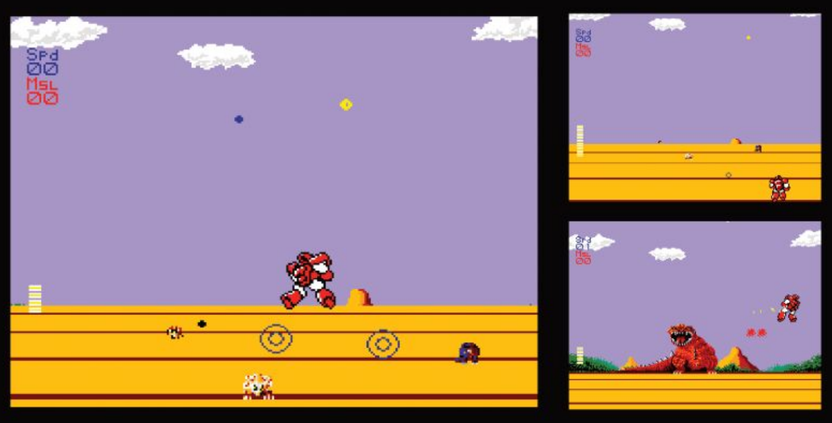
CRITICAL HIT

FEEDBACK

EXPECT TO PAY £280+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: TECNOSOFT
RELEASE: 1988

Esteemed shoot-'em-up developer Tecnosoft may be best known for cutting edge Sega shooters like *Thunder Force* or *Hyper Duel* but it started off with much simpler fare on Japanese computers like the MSX. The little known *Feedback* is one of its earlier technical successes. Clearly inspired by *Space Harrier*, it does a good impression of the sprite-scaling effect on the primitive MSX and plays really well too. There are multiple sections to each stage, starting out in space before taking you down to a planet's surface and, finally, to a giant boss where you'll only prevail if you've managed to collect enough missiles along the way.



» [MSX] *Feedback*'s visuals aren't using a true sprite-scaling technique but they're impressive to see on the MSX all the same!

MORE FROM TECNOSOFT
Other obscure MSX games from the Thunder Force team

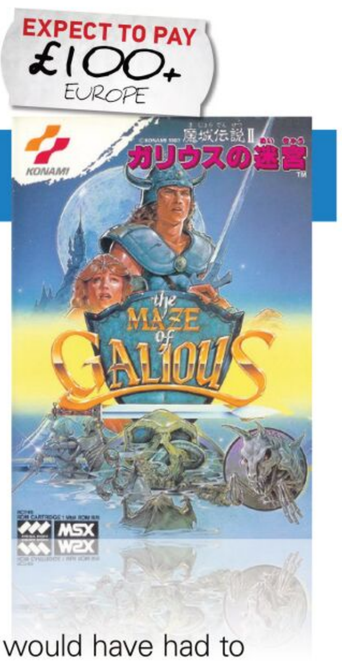
Herzog
This predecessor to *Herzog Zwei* lacks the transformation ability of its sequel, but you still get the giant mech and that proto-RTS gameplay, which is pretty incredible to see in a 1988 release!

D-Dash
Tecnosoft advertised this as a "Sci-fi Violence RPG" which all sounds very exciting. It's actually very similar to *Alien Syndrome* and features a simple mix of shooting and exploration.

Ku Gyoku Den
Roughly translated as *Legendly Nine Gems* on the title screen, this is a cute and cheerful RPG with a fun yokai/ghost theme. You can find a fan translation for this one online if you search.

AMAZING VALUE

MAZE OF GALIOUS



EXPECT TO PAY £100+ EUROPE

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1987

Subtitled *Knightmare II* in Japan, *Maze Of Galious* is a direct sequel to Konami's 1986 shoot-'em-up, but trades the shooting for platforming and exploration. Swapping between two characters, Popolon and Aphrodite, you need to make use of their unique abilities to uncover obscure secrets and conquer 174 screens of a castle that feels like a proto-Metroidvania. *Maze Of Galious* was a huge inspiration on indie hit *La Mulana*, and it's easy to see why. It's packed with so many secrets that Eighties kids would have had to trade knowledge with their friends to get the most out of it, and could play for hours on end and still not see everything.

EXPECT TO PAY £45+ JAPAN

» [MSX] Pause a game of *Maze Of Galious* and your character will rest on a toilet. Leave it paused too long and they'll fall in!

If you'd like to buy *Maze Of Galious* then we've got some more good news for you. Each release of the game detects the region of your hardware and plays in your language, so you can buy the Japanese version at half the price and still play in English!

THE PRICE OF FISH...

SPACE MANBOW

EXPECT TO PAY £300+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1989

Konami released three excellent *Gradius* games on MSX and even debuted the *Parodius* series there, but its best MSX shoot-'em-up remains exclusive to the system. *Space Manbow* is a simpler shooter than *Gradius* – you can't manually select your power-ups, for example – but what it lacks in mechanical complexity it more than makes up for in sheer spectacle. Using the extra oomph of the MSX2 and some neat programming tricks, it bucks the trend by offering unusually smooth scrolling, both horizontally and vertically, and sets an incredible first impression by flying you above a mammoth, multi-screen tank that spans the entire length of the first stage!

» [MSX] Space Manbow is so good, it's a shame it's trapped on the MSX. Let's have a re-release, Konami!

Unfortunately, *Space Manbow*'s asking price has risen over the last three decades as its reputation has grown, but you can at least buy in complete confidence you're getting a gobsmacking exclusive.

MORE GAMES TO CONSIDER

PARODIUS
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1988
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£100+**

YS III: WANDERERS FROM YS
DEVELOPER: NIHON FALCOM
RELEASED: 1989
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£70+**

VAMPIRE KILLER
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1986
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£130+**, JAPAN **£125+**

BOKOSUKA WARS
DEVELOPER: ASCII CORPORATION
RELEASED: 1984
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£75+**

KNIGHTMARE
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1986
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£50+**, JAPAN **£45+**

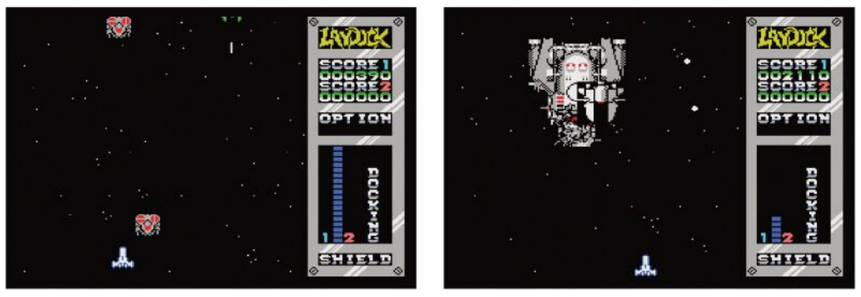
TWO FOR ONE

SUPER LAYDOCK: MISSION STRIKER

EXPECT TO PAY £50+ JAPAN

DEVELOPER: T&E SOFT
RELEASE: 1987

■ It's not often the 'super' version of a game is released on older hardware but that's exactly what happened with the *Laydock* series – a fun two-player shooter that allows both players to join together and co-operatively control a larger ship. The first made its debut on MSX2 in 1986 but this enhanced version runs on a bog standard MSX. Despite the backwards step, *Super Laydock* is a slicker game, with bigger, bolder sprites and improved gameplay. It also comes on a cartridge, rather than the original's floppy disk, so it's compatible with every MSX system. If you really want to push the boat out, then look out for *Super Laydock Network Version*, which came packaged with a modem you could use to register your high score to an online leaderboard.



» [MSX] The *Laydock* games are half-decent shooters played solo, but are much more interesting with two players.

FLIPPING GOOD

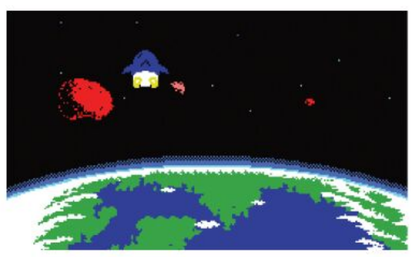
PENGUIN ADVENTURE

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1986

■ *Penguin Adventure* is best known as the first game Hideo Kojima worked on, but among MSX fans it's cherished as one of the system's best exclusives. Relatively inexpensive as far as high profile MSX games go, it's also so well-made, making it a must for any MSX collection. A technically stunning game for 1986, *Penguin Adventure* features fast and impressive pseudo-3D gameplay as the penguin Pentaro relentlessly waddles across ice, swims down rivers and even flies through space in his quest to retrieve a magical apple for his poisoned love. Polished and filled with a myriad secrets, *Penguin Adventure* always feels fresh and surprising every time you play.

EXPECT TO PAY £50+ EUROPE

EXPECT TO PAY £30+ JAPAN



» [MSX] Finding secrets is half the fun in *Penguin Adventure*. If you fall down certain ice holes you might discover a hidden shop or even Santa!

ALESTED DEVELOPMENT

ALESTE GAIDEN

DEVELOPER: COMPILE
RELEASE: 1989

■ Compile's classic shoot-'em-up series recently flew back onto the radar with *Aleste Collection*. It's a superb compilation of the Master System and Game Gear entries but certainly not a comprehensive one. If you want absolutely every game in the series then *Aleste Gaiden* is a very expensive must. This spin-off was only ever available in a special issue of *Compile Disc Station*, a monthly disk magazine. *Aleste Gaiden* trades the usual spaceships of the series for an on-foot armoured warrior who slings shurikens and jumps wide gaps as he fights his way through five ground level stages. The Compile quality is there but the disk is very hard to find, making it one of the MSX's most sought after games.

EXPECT TO PAY £400+ JAPAN

» [MSX] Be prepared to splash the cash if you want to have a go on this.

MORE MSX ALESTE

Two affordable alternatives to Aleste Gaiden

Aleste

While the MSX port of *Aleste* is less impressive than the Master System original in the graphics and sound department, it does have a slightly different story and features two exclusive stages. It's also a damn fine shooter in its own right, so is well worth picking up.

Aleste 2

Released exclusively for MSX2, *Aleste 2* is a superb sequel that plays well and both looks and sounds better than its immediate predecessor. For fans of the series it's significant as the first appearance of *Musha Aleste* protagonist Ellinor but everyone else will want it for that gorgeous box art!

GUARDIC

DEVELOPER: COMPILE
RELEASED: 1986
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£110+**

NEMESIS 3: THE EVE OF DESTRUCTION

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1989
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£170+**, JAPAN **£140+**

PSYCHIC WAR: COSMIC SOLDIER 2

DEVELOPER: KOGADO STUDIO
RELEASED: 1988
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£250+**

THE GOONIES

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1985
EXPECT TO PAY
EUROPE **£65+**, JAPAN **£55+**

ASHGUINE STORY II

DEVELOPER: T&E SOFT
RELEASED: 1987
EXPECT TO PAY
JAPAN **£40+**

CLASSIC MOMENTS

Lemmings

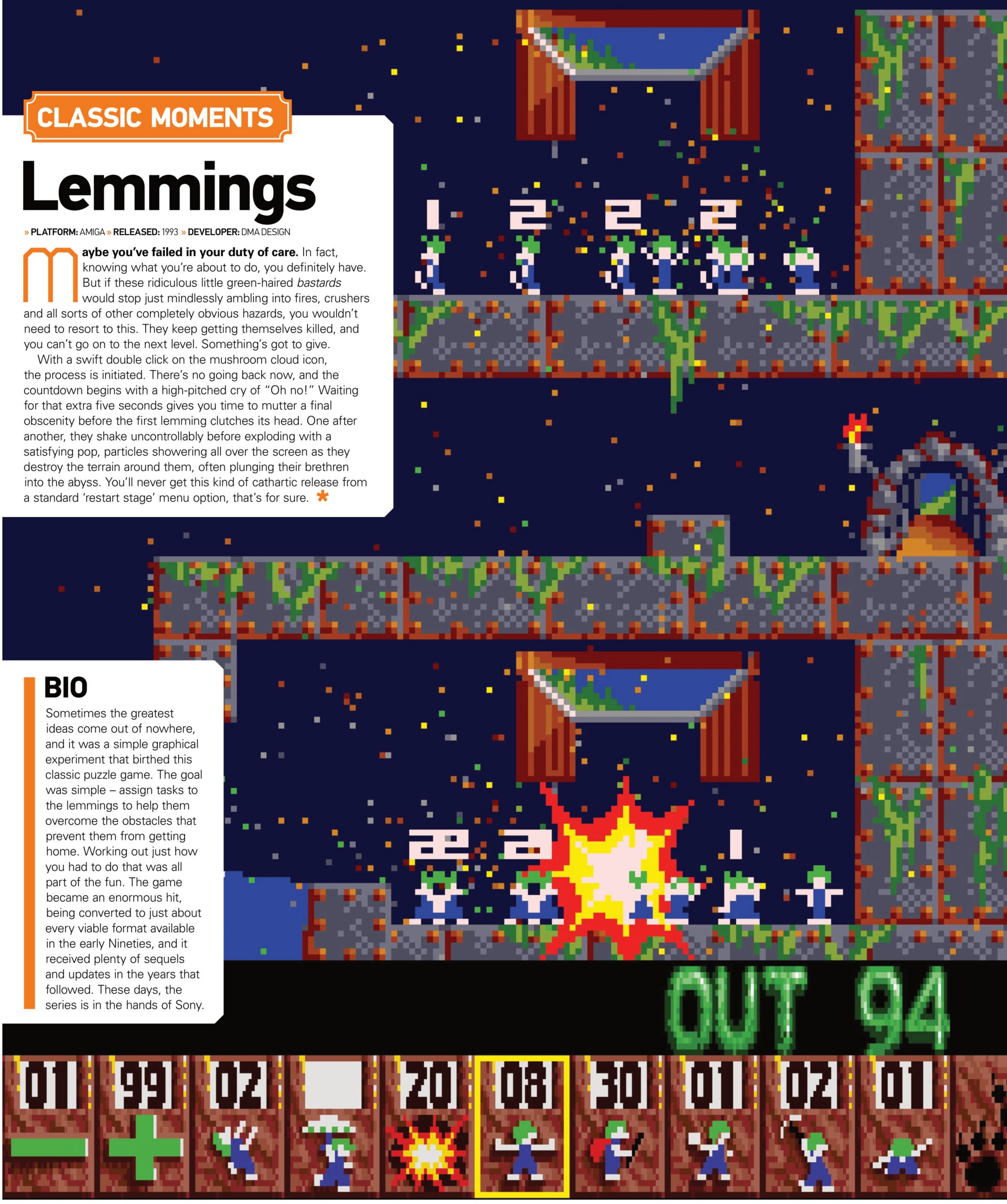
» **PLATFORM:** AMIGA » **RELEASED:** 1993 » **DEVELOPER:** DMA DESIGN

Maybe you've failed in your duty of care. In fact, knowing what you're about to do, you definitely have. But if these ridiculous little green-haired *bastards* would stop just mindlessly ambling into fires, crushers and all sorts of other completely obvious hazards, you wouldn't need to resort to this. They keep getting themselves killed, and you can't go on to the next level. Something's got to give.

With a swift double click on the mushroom cloud icon, the process is initiated. There's no going back now, and the countdown begins with a high-pitched cry of "Oh no!" Waiting for that extra five seconds gives you time to mutter a final obscenity before the first lemming clutches its head. One after another, they shake uncontrollably before exploding with a satisfying pop, particles showering all over the screen as they destroy the terrain around them, often plunging their brethren into the abyss. You'll never get this kind of cathartic release from a standard 'restart stage' menu option, that's for sure. *

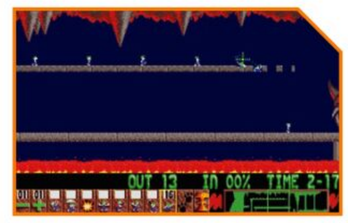
BIO

Sometimes the greatest ideas come out of nowhere, and it was a simple graphical experiment that birthed this classic puzzle game. The goal was simple – assign tasks to the lemmings to help them overcome the obstacles that prevent them from getting home. Working out just how you had to do that was all part of the fun. The game became an enormous hit, being converted to just about every viable format available in the early Nineties, and it received plenty of sequels and updates in the years that followed. These days, the series is in the hands of Sony.



MORE CLASSIC LEMMINGS MOMENTS

Learning By Doing



Rather than taking you by the hand and explaining the game's rules, *Lemmings* likes to demonstrate them in action. A great example of this is We All Fall Down, a stage in which the difference between safe and fatal falls is shown to you via a thin platform that a lemming survives falling from – but only if it digs through.

A Plan Comes Together

Lemmings is the kind of game that can drive you utterly bonkers if you're not doing well at it. There's definitely a grim satisfaction to be had from blowing the critters up, but the elation you feel when you finally manage to best a stage that had stumped you for ages, that's truly magnificent. You can sometimes feel like a genius.

Satanic Panic

Combine the Hell graphics of the game with the number 666 written in scenery, and it's not too hard to tell what's going on here. It's not actually the toughest stage despite the unique scenery, but it's fun because the console versions cut the stage. Amiga owners just didn't need that kind of nannying from Commodore.

Beast Mode

This welcome cameo from another game published by Psygnosis was a bit of a funny one. After all, *Shadow Of The Beast* had been renowned for its flashy visuals and rather undercooked gameplay, while *Lemmings* was a rather simple-looking game with solid puzzle fundamentals and plenty of long term value.

ULTIMATE GUIDE

THE LEGENDARY AXE

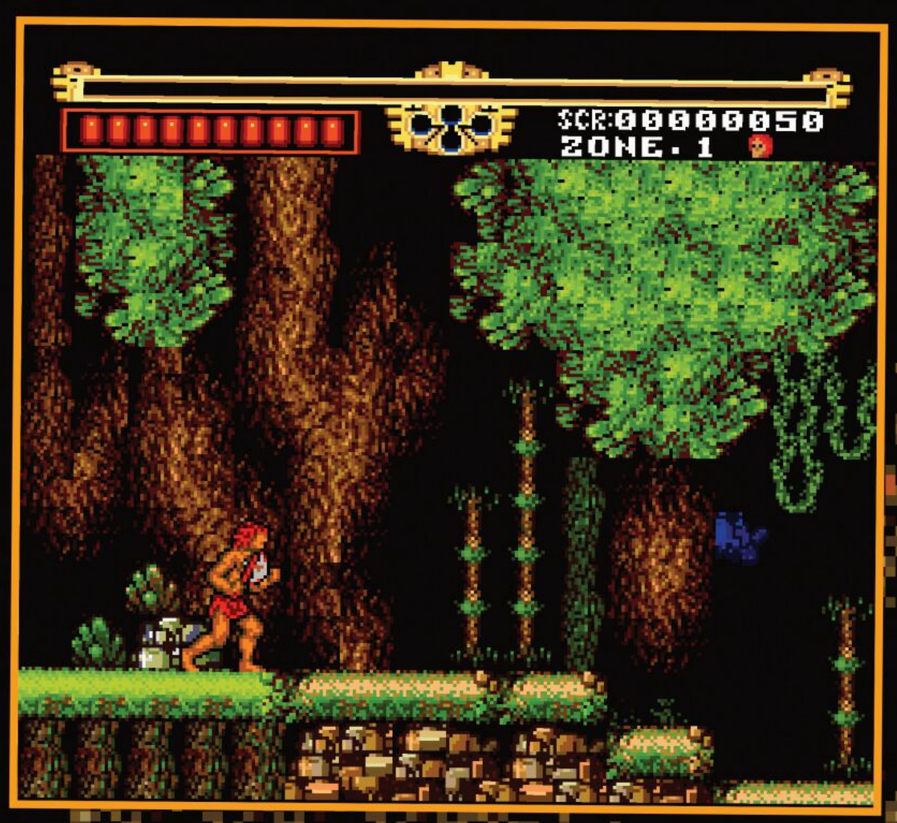
WHILE EUROPEAN READERS MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY RECOGNISE THIS, OUR US AUDIENCE DEFINITELY SHOULD. ACTION-PLATFORMERS WERE UBIQUITOUS IN 1989, BUT THE LEGENDARY AXE HOLDS A SIGNIFICANT MULTI-AWARD-WINNING POSITION AS ONE OF THE TURBOGRAFX-16'S FINER LAUNCH TITLES. IT'S SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST RASTAN

WORDS BY
JOHN SZCZEPANIAK

Readers in Europe will know of the PC Engine by NEC and Hudson, thanks to a small but passionate importing crowd (especially in France). Over its lifespan the system received several major classics. What is perhaps less known is the TurboGrafx-16, its rebranded US equivalent with a distinctly American following, magazine coverage, and localised release schedule. Interestingly there's no precise consensus on the exact day the TurboGrafx-16 and its earliest games launched, but sometime between August and November 1989 it received the following line-up: *Alien Crush*, *Blazing Lazers*, *China Warrior*, *Dungeon Explorer*, *Keith Courage In Alpha Zones*, *R-Type*, *Victory Run* and *Vigilante*. It was a strong collection covering the most popular genres of the time. In that list was also *The Legendary Axe* (hereafter *TLA*), arriving end of August or early-ish September. As we're about to show, it was a phenomenal showcase for NEC's new hardware.

The Japanese PC Engine release of *TLA*, known as *Makyou Densetsu*, came out a year earlier on 23 September 1988. In many ways *TLA* exemplifies that wonderful epoch of the 16-bit generation when a small Japanese team from a minor developer could punch above its weight to produce something distributed and acclaimed internationally, competing and succeeding on the world stage, yet remaining deeply enigmatic. Not only is there no consensus on its US release date, but there's conflicting citations of which company actually created it. Japanese Wikipedia claims Aicom, and some of its development staff did *later* work on games credited to Aicom, but neither the game itself, nor manual, nor old magazines, nor various websites cite anything other than Victor Musical Industries.

The team was small, only around nine people; two of the programmers doubled up as the only credited testers (keep this in mind when contemplating the difficulty). Many of the staff never had credits beyond the Nineties, reflecting the consolidation of Japan's games industry with each successive generation. Lead designer Tokuhiro Takemori previously worked on *RoboWarrior* at Hudson and later created *TLA*'s true successor *The Astyanax* for arcades in 1989 (see boxout). Afterwards he made *Avenging Spirit* and then vanished. Co-designer Keisuke Abe immediately afterwards created the *Bonk* franchise and rose to fame. Programmer Mamoru Shiratani would program *TLA*'s



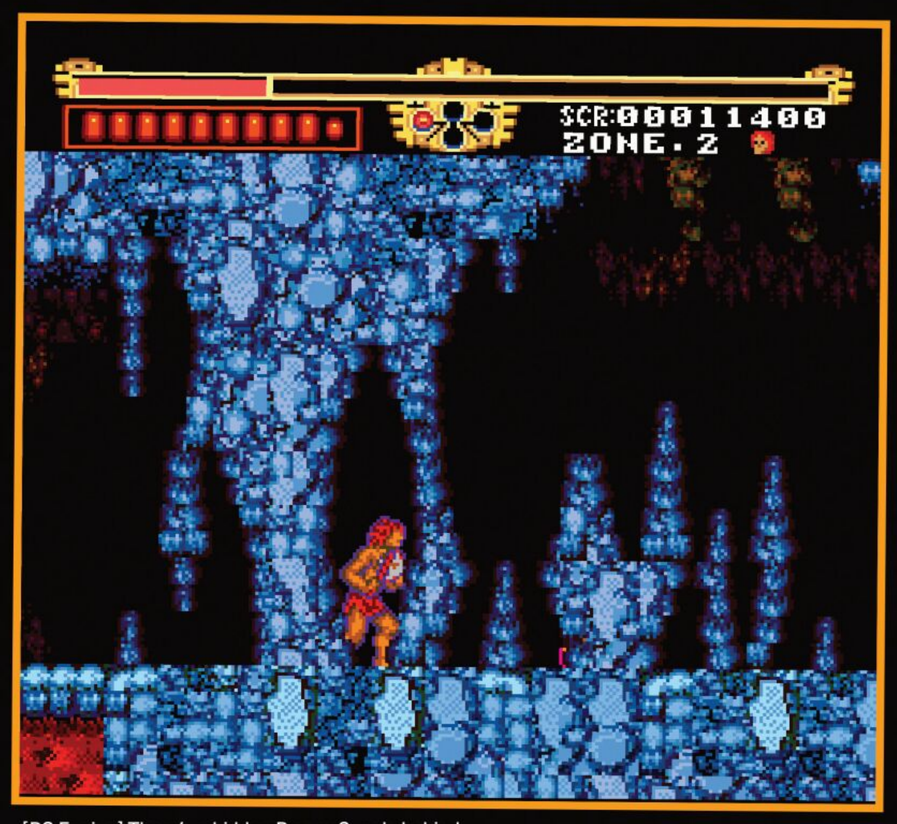
» [PC Engine] The jungle looks so lush and inviting, but go slowly – victory requires careful, methodical actions.

pseudo-sequel and see multiple credits for decades. Composer Jun Chikuma did a fine job making *TLA*'s soundtrack almost as memorable as *Castlevania*'s, then went on to carve a niche composing for seemingly every *Bomberman* ever. The rest of the staff were like dust in the wind.

When *Makyou Densetsu* landed in September 1988 the PC Engine had been out in Japan just shy of a year and its portfolio was shockingly anaemic. Less than 20 games were available and we'd challenge any reader to claim much more than *R-Type* or *Alien Crush* as being especially good. Despite filling an urgent void the reception at Japanese magazines was mixed: *Famitsu* scored it 7/7/7/5 (26/40), with one of the reviewers clearly displeased; though they did give it a two-page preview in the earlier issue 54. *PC Engine Fan* scored it 21/30, which is reasonable but nowhere near the acclaim it would find in America. Japan's reaction might seem surprising until you realise 1988 was *still* the era of Famicom – *Dragon Quest III* captured the nation's heart that year while rival systems were only *just* starting to shake Nintendo's hegemony. Though in fairness, *Famitsu* also only gave the Famicom port of *Bionic Commando* 26/40 in a preceding issue.

Roughly a year later *TLA* would be localised and enjoying much praise amidst the TurboGrafx-16 launch. *Electronic Gaming Monthly* scored it a spectacular 9/8/8/8, with both Ed Semrad and Jim Allee stating *TLA* is how *Rastan* should have been; *EGM* scored the Sega Master System port of *Rastan* a meagre 6/6/6/6 on the preceding page. *TLA* was the highest scored game that issue. In December *EGM* voted *TLA* the Best Game Of The Year on TurboGrafx-16; *Ninja Gaiden* was the Nintendo category winner, *Wonder Boy III* was Sega's, while the overall agnostic winner was the Sega Genesis conversion of

» [PC Engine] The opening level is clever – these pits do not kill you, instead you end up in some caverns.



» [PC Engine] There's a hidden Power Supply behind the rocks that look like heavy metal devil horns.

» [PC Engine] These subterranean enemies were named Amoeba in the US manual, but Ultra Iguana in the Japanese.

» [PC Engine] A little left from this blue Nomad, you can drop to a lower level to discover crystals and a 1-UP!

» [PC Engine] These grey bears are like the boss from Zone 1; trigger them one at a time for easier dispatch.

ENHANCE YOUR JOURNEY

BREAK THE ORANGE JAGU STATUES FOR POWER-UPS

POWER SUPPLY

■ Increases attack. Covet it like an idol – the game revolves around this! Collect four for maximum attack potential; you lose potential each time you die.

WING

■ This increases the speed of your axe slashes – slow, medium, or fast. But if you're being patient so as to attack with maximum strength, this likely won't matter.

LIFE RECOVER

■ There are three levels of health recovery: the smallest recovers one unit, the bigger in green recovers three and the large pink circle recovers seven.

POINTS CRYSTAL

■ Red adds 1,000 points to your score. Blue adds 5,000. We earned our first bonus 1-UP at 30,000 points. More lives are earned at higher scores.

1-UP

■ This small figure represents the id as part of the Freudian 'psychic apparatus' alongside the ego and super-ego. Nah, it's just an extra life.

WATERFALL KEY

■ This is so weird and random. You only find one such key, just once, and it opens the waterfall directly adjacent, revealing more Jagu Statues.

BOSS RUSH

GOOD LUCK, THESE BOSSES LATER BECOME REGULAR ENEMIES!

GIANT TARANTULA

This optional mini-boss graces the cover on both the Japanese and US versions of the game, and relinquishes the first Power Supply – do not skip it!

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Just jump and attack. The webbing it shoots can be dispatched with your axe. Every few strikes some legs go flying – awesome!

DEMON GIANT

In Japan these were called 'Maneki Guma' meaning bear – we're guessing the US manual calls them demons due to conflating with 'akuma'.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

You fight two! You might win without the Tarantula power-up, but you really want those charged strikes. Try to manoeuvre both to one side.

GIANT BOULDER

This is different to the regular brown boulder that directly precedes it. This one is glowing green, is seemingly possessed and follows you!

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Don't strike as it approaches. Use the vine and try to attack as it moves away. After it turns into a regular boulder keep on hitting it until it crumbles!

AQUA LUNG

The first really challenging boss, until you've worked out the pattern. Annoyingly this battle starts with a Nomad following you.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

It's very unlikely to hit you while ducking – keep low! Observe its pattern. Stay at the screen edge to avoid fireballs, or strike them.

CAVE MEN

It's just two recycled Cave Men in an enclosed arena. The game technically classes it as a mini-stage on its own calling it: Zone 4A.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

You fought one of these guys in the previous level's waterfall area (or maybe two if you ran past). Now it's a pincer attack!

PUNJABBI

We're not being racist here – shockingly, the US manual calls these two javelin-throwing bosses Punjabbi. The Japanese manual calls them Gous.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

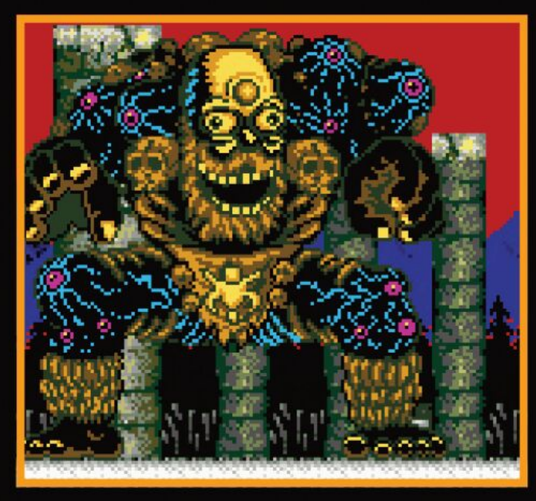
Immediately move left and attack with full charge. The right-side boss stays in his area unless you're in the middle. *Never* fight both together.

JAGU (FIRST FORM)

Online guides refer to him as 'Panda' but both manuals clearly name this three-eyed chubby loincloth-wearing weirdo as Jagu.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

His fireballs will never disappear on their own, so strike them all. Allow your axe to charge and hit him right after he teleports for good damage.



JAGU (COMBINED FORM)

Right before the fight you can see the chubby boss run across the screen then assimilate himself by absorbing other enemies and morphing into this.

HOW TO BEAT THEM:

Thankfully, he only has *one* attack: jumping in an arc with his leg lowered! Move only when he jumps high, attack only when fully charged.

Ghouls 'N Ghosts. Issue 13 of *VideoGames & Computer Entertainment*, also awarded it 1989 Game Of The Year. On page 45 it took pride and place, *VG&CE* editors were enamoured with its "next-generation" quality and stating it "surpassed all other comers to win". This isn't hyperbole when you consider most of the other winners that year were for the NES, with *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *A Boy And His Blob*, *Mega Man 2*, and *Zelda II* taking genre specific categories. *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* on Genesis took the best arcade conversion award.

Three times so far we've mentioned *Rastan* – the 1987 Taito arcade action platforming epic which riffed heavily on Robert Howard's *Conan* creation. It's worth addressing that while *TLA* uses the established barbarians and steel theme, it is no more derivative of *Rastan* than it is of *Rygar*, *Black Tiger*, or innumerable other similar games. Importantly, *TLA* does enough to stand apart from its contemporaries. It's no surprise it scored highly and won GOTY accolades.

If we've taken this long to describe the game itself, it's because *TLA* is best savoured in contemplation of the contextual framework that formed it. Today the game is almost forgotten, never re-released on digital platforms such as the Wii, passed over for the PC Engine Mini collection, and inaccessible unless you own the original HuCard or emulate it. Sad irony then that emulation is a poor way to experience *TLA* – this is a thinking man's action-platformer, and brute-forcing your way through with save-states and hex-editing will neuter the genius of its design.

There's a surprising level of depth and nuance, especially compared to similar games launched alongside it. The core mechanic revolves around collecting Power Supply icons, lighting four slots at the top of the screen to facilitate five levels of attack strength. Without collecting any your power remains at minimum; each one collected expands the bar by a quarter. The gauge rapidly recharges, but swinging your weapon depletes its entirety (the exact system later found in *Seiken Densetsu* on Game Boy and then *Secret Of Mana*).

» [PC Engine] To pass the maze drop down in these zones: 5E to 5I, 5L to 5T, 5U to 5O, then 5P to 5Q and to the boss!

» [PC Engine] Are we spoiling the ending here, or are we adhering to the British government mandate for all magazines to feature a game's finale?

Newcomers find *TLA* difficult because the urge is to thrash madly – but resist this, calm down, let the power gauge charge, and use slow deliberate movements. An enemy needing multiple strikes at zero power might need only one at half-bar. If you panic and die your gauge is reduced by one-quarter (it's a bit like *Gradius* – you want to collect power-ups then play carefully).

Often progress is restricted by combat barriers which are almost like lock-and-key puzzles requiring patience and enemy observation. You can imagine it benefitting strategy guides (one was released in Japan) and playground banter. Zone 5 even has a side-scrolling maze to navigate – it's not too complicated, but it's *a lot more* than went into other TurboGrafx-16 games back then.

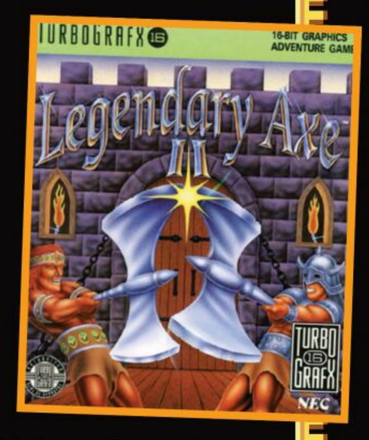
Remember that 'launch' list at the start? *China Warrior*, *Keith Courage* and *Vigilante* are all similar but *shallower* experiences, even if they looked and sounded impressive for the time. *TLA* might not have the open-world RPG mechanics of *Battle Of Olympus*, but the tightly refined combat and light exploration elevated it above its peers, at least for a time (about eight months after *TLA*'s Japan release *Golden Axe* hit arcades).

While *TLA* would be superseded by more ambitious games on stronger hardware, it still remains as an alluring historical landmark in gaming and, for a certain group of Americans, the title that defined their 1989. ★

» [PC Engine] This is what you really wanted to see: the axe to the groin shot. You filthy scoundrels.

A LEGENDARY SEQUEL?

IGNORE THE NAME, THE TRUE SEQUEL IS ELSEWHERE



Is *Legendary Axe II* the sequel to *The Legendary Axe*? The English name claims it to be, and the two share programmer Mamoru Shiratani, *but is it really*? We posit that contrary to evidence the two games are not related, and the true sequel by Tokuhiro Takemori is *The Astyanax* in arcades.

In Japan the original was *Makyou Densetsu* (*Demon Realm Legend*) and the PC Engine sequel *Ankoku Densetsu* (*Dark Legend*), with adverts for *Ankoku* clearly stating it was the follow-up. It had some good ideas: enemies break apart in different ways depending on how you attack them, a screen-clearing sub-weapon, stomp attacks, etc. The US localisation dropped 'The' and added Roman numerals. American critics weren't fooled though and criticised the dissimilarity, both in looks and mechanically. It could be the sequel to *Rastan*, *Rygar*, or innumerable other games.

We feel the true sequel is *The Astyanax*. Not just 'spiritually' either. Playing it for a few minutes reveals the two are near identical – the physics, locations, enemies, axe-swing animation, deflecting projectiles, statues holding power-ups, charging attack gauge, everything is overwhelmingly alike. Critics did not miss this fact either!

Ignore the NES 'port' of *The Astyanax*, it is to the arcade game what *Legendary Axe II* is to *The Legendary Axe*.

» [Arcade] Heavyweight characters are strong enough to grab pillars or poles and swing them at opponents for mega damage.

Vagrant Story

AN INTRO SO GOOD, I'VE NEVER SKIPPED IT

» PlayStation » 2000 » Square

Finally, after a good year of searching, I've managed to grab a US copy of Square's acclaimed action RPG and it only cost me £20. Granted, it lacks the bonus disc, but considering it can sell complete for as much as £90, I'm happy to go without it.

I've never completed *Vagrant Story*, but it's a game I've started many, many times. In fact I even owned it back in the day and it also turns out that I have a PAL digital copy on my PS3, but I've never managed to stick with it for more than a few hours. This in itself is odd, because I absolutely adore *Vagrant Story*'s intro. In fact I'd go as far to say it's one of my favourites of any Square game from the period.

The Japanese developer has a well-earned reputation for how cinematic its games feel, but what I like about *Vagrant Story*'s intro is that, aside from a small CGI movie-- when the game loads, everything during the opening ten minutes or so is all done using the game's engine and it looks absolutely fantastic as a result. I've always appreciated the aesthetic styling of Square's game and the PlayStation's famous warped textures actually work in *Vagrant Story*'s favour. Even when there's very little happening during cutscenes, protagonist Ashley Riot and his adversaries appear to be coming to life as their character models distort and pulsate in a way that actually enhances Yasumi Matsuno's distinctive design rather than detracting from it.

In addition to looking truly gorgeous, *Vagrant Story*'s opening cleverly sets up the plot of everything that's to come. With just a few scenes and sentences you learn that treachery is afoot in the kingdom of Valendia and that the Müllenkamp cult led by Sydney Losstarot have infiltrated Duke Bardorba's mansion and kidnapped his son. The Riskbreaker Ashley Riot infiltrates the mansion and stops the leader with a crossbow to the heart, only to see Sydney rise and escape. This entire sequence is not only exceptionally cinematic, but it also cuts flawlessly to in-game combat due to using the same graphics engine. It's a beautiful blend of action and cinema that continually blows me away (and if I'm honest, it's probably the reason why I've rarely been able to get past it). ✱

PICO GAMING'S FANTASY

WE SPEAK TO CREATOR AND COMMUNITY TO FIND OUT HOW A 'CONSOLE' REPLICATING RETRO HARDWARE LIMITATIONS IS GIVING BIRTH TO GREAT GAMES, SPARKING CREATIVITY AND PROVIDING A DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT LOVED BY VETERANS AND HOBBYISTS ALIKE

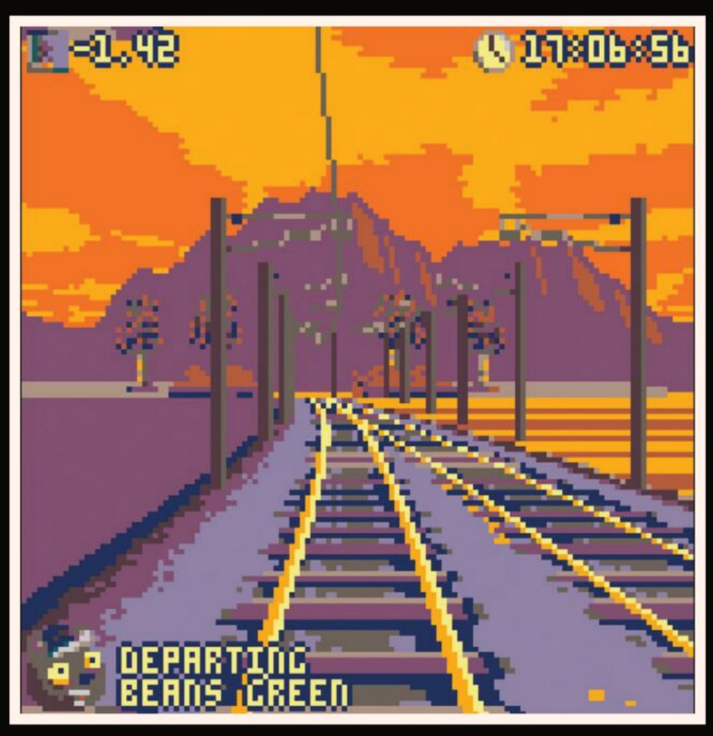
WORDS BY PAUL WALKER-EMIG

If you've never heard of the Pico-8 before, you may find yourself stepping into something of a conceptual quagmire. It is a console that doesn't exist. Its games look and sound like undiscovered Eighties retro titles, but most are less that five years old. Its creator, Joseph White, better known in the Pico-8 scene as 'Zep', describes it as "impossible to place at any particular moment in time, like a machine that exists in a parallel world where the history of hardware development drifted in a different direction for a decade or two". So, what, exactly, *is* this manifestation of alternate history? This 'retro' machine that's younger than the PS4? This 'console' that doesn't exist as a physical object? In what will become a theme as we explore the Pico-8, it's really quite simple.

The Pico-8 is a 'fantasy console'. That is to say, it is a program you can download on your PC or Mac that is designed to emulate the feel of a retro machine. Anyone who develops games for it must work within its harsh limitations, closer to the machines of the Eighties than they are the powerhouse consoles of today. It comes with built-in editing tools that allow users to create and share their 'cartridges' online, or via a built-in cartridge browser called Splore.

The console is probably most famous as the birthplace of the critically-acclaimed platformer *Celeste*, originally developed on the Pico-8 during a game jam before being expanded into a full PC and console release. The Pico-8 is so famous for its relationship to *Celeste*, in fact, that this is almost the only context in which it ever gets mentioned. But the Pico-8 deserves to be far more than a footnote in the story of one well-known title. It is not only a piece of software where you can find a host of great games and fascinating experiments that you wouldn't come across elsewhere, it is also a community. Through the Pico-8 forum, its Discord server, Twitter and elsewhere, Pico enthusiasts, from veteran developers, to young amateurs, share projects, help each other out with problems, build ray-tracing experiments, make 3D modellers and other such tools, create music, teach coding and more.

"Pico-8 started as LEX500: a BASIC programming environment that felt something like a BBC Micro with a built-in sprite editor and a fixed-display format," says Joseph on its origins, though the Commodore 64's colour palette, the graphical style associated with IBM's EGA graphics and the succinct design of Atari 2600 games would all have an influence as the tool evolved. "I had started out in the early Noughties by working on in-house tools, and was naturally thinking about workflows and how to make development a more focused and enjoyable process. I didn't want to get too caught up in making tools though, so shelved it to work on some puzzle games." Joseph later returned to LEX 500 while working on



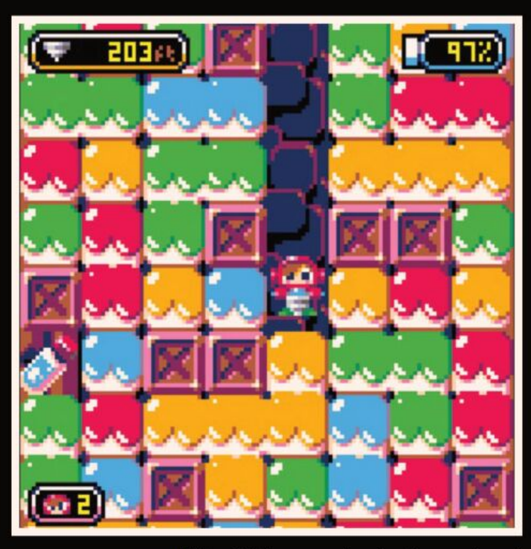
» [Pico-8] *Cab Ride*, a chill game where you drive a train between stations, is precisely the kind of beautiful and unusual surprise that we love to discover.

» [Pico-8] This cool, stylish card game where you bet with your own blood goes by the name *High Stakes*.

PICO-8: CONSOLE

a game called *Voxatron*, which he wanted to contain bespoke editing tools for players to create their own voxel-based games. "I added a music tracker and map editor to LEX500 and renamed it to Pico-8. I initially considered Pico-8 to be a sort of minimal playground to support *Voxatron* development, but it quickly grew into its own thing."

Joseph tells us that he had difficulty conceptualising exactly what *Voxatron* and Pico-8 were. "An important turning point was realising that the different types of content included in *Voxatron*: arcade and adventure game modes, minigames, future DLC and user-made levels, could best be presented as one unified type of thing: cartridges. It followed that the system itself, as well as Pico-8, would be consoles. As well as helping to present the two projects to users in a tidy unified way, this framing also made it easier to design many details about the systems, as I could weigh potential ideas by how congruent they were with the console analogy."



» [Pico-8] There are loads of examples of games inspired by old titles on the Pico-8, including the *Mr Driller* lookalike *Picodriller*.

CHRIS DONNELLY

» Chris Donnelly is a professional musician who teaches and composes music for videogames.

TOM HALL

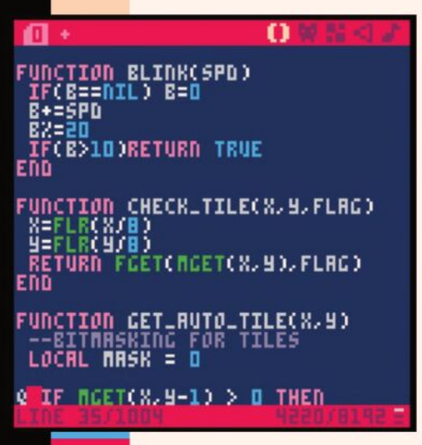
» Id cofounder and former Ion Storm developer Tom Hall is a Pico enthusiast who now develops VR games at Resolution Games.

Out of this, the Pico-8 as it is now known was born, released officially in 2015. But obvious questions present themselves: why would you create an artificial console with artificial limits? And what is the appeal for developers of working within those limits?

Joseph points firstly to an artistic choice. He says that in setting limitations for the Pico-8, he was conscious that "specifications can be chosen for their aesthetic contribution rather than for being technologically impressive or cost-effective". Naturally, this aesthetic has a particular appeal for fans of retro games and everyone we spoke to about the Pico-8 acknowledged nostalgia as part of its appeal, but its not only retro fans that are attracted to it. "There are certainly users who appreciate minimal systems because they grew up with ▶

CREATE NEW WORLDS

THE KEY TOOLS USED WHEN MAKING GAMES WITH THE PICO-8



NUTS AND BOLTS

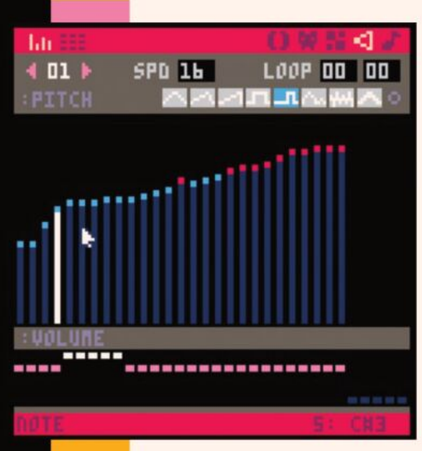
■ The first element of the Pico-8's built-in development tools is the code editor. The Pico-8 uses the Lua programming language and allows for easy copy and pasting to make replicating code between projects and sharing easy. You can also see the code for any game you play on it.

PRETTY WITH PIXELS

■ The Pico-8 has a built in sprite editor, with a simple colour palette comprised of 16 possible colours(though if you know what you are doing it is possible to access a further 16). This is where you make your characters, objects and environments.

MAPPING IT OUT

■ Once you've created your sprites in the pixel editor, the Pico-8's map editor gives you a space to put it all together. Place your sprites in here – grass, trees, hazards, or whatever else – and you've got yourself a level.

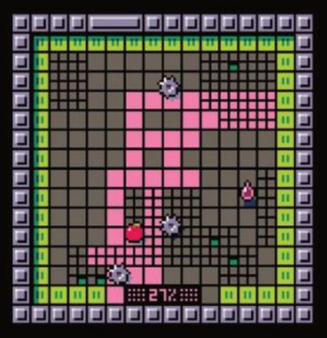


AUDIOPHILE

■ The Pico-8's waveform editor is the place you make your sounds. You can draw waveforms, play with the pitch and tweak the volume to make your jump sounds, hit sounds, or whatever it is you need for the game that you're making.

MUSIC MAKER

■ A good game needs good music and that's where the Pico-8's music editor comes in. You can put in chords, change the 'instruments' to tweak the texture of the sound and loop your music in patterns to create surprisingly sophisticated compositions.



» [Pico-8] In *Alpine Alpaca*, you have to play cards that determine your direction and try to guide your character through gates for points.

» [Pico-8] A dice minigame is used to determine the power of your attacks on enemies in *Dice Mice*.

▶ them and don't want to lose what was good about them, beyond simply having nostalgic feelings about it," says Joseph, "but there are also kids without any other experience, who don't think twice about sitting down to draw 8x8 sprites and to play tiny pixelated games with bleepy sound.

"There are also indie developers in their 20s who grew up with 3D games, but just prefer making low resolution 2D things as a stylistic choice or because it's more fun."

The other aspect to the Pico-8's limitations, Joseph explains, is that he sees them as a way to spark developers' creativity. "I think that the right set of constraints can provide a cosy, inviting space to develop in that paradoxically feels more free and creative. Modern development environments aim to be as general and flexible as possible, which makes them, in a sense, bland. This is useful in some respects, but has a hidden cost: it requires the developer to do a lot of work in cutting out design possibilities, and nudges projects to be larger than they need to be. A constrained machine gives you a sort of creative starting point that reduces decision fatigue and writer's block.

"Choosing limitations is a bit like making a built-in, mini design manifesto. For example, the 32k cartridge size is about wanting to invite users to make small playful things, and to feel OK to wrap up projects early and put a bow on them when they run out of cartridge space. The primitive API is about inviting people to build and understand things from first principles so that they can have creative control at all levels. If there was a built-in physics engine for example, then a lot of games would feel kind of the same. To decide on limitations, I'd work backwards from how the machine should feel and what its natural uses would be. A lot of decisions were also made intuitively; just getting a feel for which choices were well aligned with the spirit of the machine, without necessarily being able to give a good analytic reason for them."

Tom Hall, a veteran developer who worked on the likes of *Doom*, *Commander Keen* and *Anachronox* is one creator who found themselves attracted to these limitations. "I remember wanting to be able to noodle around with small programs like I used to do on the Apple II+ in the Eighties," Tom recalls on his introduction to the Pico-8. "I was interested in this new, easy development environment for testing out game ideas and the more I learned about it and played around with it, the more it felt like 'home', making little games like when I was a teenager. I was hooked."

Tom has developed a number of games for the Pico-8, including *Who Stole The Coal?* (praised by Tim Schafer as "his new favourite Christmas game") and, his biggest Pico-8 project, a speedrunning-focused parkour game called *Myrrh's Edge*, made in collaboration with Brian 'Squirrel' Eiserloh, Toby Hefflin and with music from Chris Donnelly.

"Developing in Pico-8 is the easiest development I've ever done," Tom says on the appeal of developing for the console. "All the

PIC'O MIX: DEFINING

CELESTE CLASSIC

■ Undoubtedly the Pico-8's most famous game is the original version of *Celeste*, which would later be elaborated on to create the critically acclaimed platformer that hit PC and consoles in 2018. The original is still great, as is the sequel *Celeste 2: Lani's Trek*, released this year to celebrate *Celeste Classic*'s three-year anniversary.

CAKE MONSTERS

■ This clever puzzle game sees you controlling monsters that have to be guided to gobble up pieces of cake that match their colour. The game keeps introducing new ways to elaborate on its simple core concept, having you combine monsters to mix colours, avoid traps and so on. It's one for us – monsters and cake together at last.

ALFONZO'S BOWLING CHALLENGE

■ This game is reminiscent of *Frog Fractions*, in that you go in expecting one thing and soon realise you're in for something completely different. Saying too much more would spoil this short and creative comedy game, so we'll leave it up to you to discover more.

MAI-CHAN'S SWEET BUNS

■ Serving up buns to customers from Mai-Chan's delicious collection is the aim of the game in this well-crafted puzzler. Orders of more than one have to be taken from buns that match up in a row or column of the corresponding number, so you have to carefully plan ahead. Also the name made us giggle a whole lot.

STORMING THE GRAND-MOTHERSHIP

■ This bullet-hell shooter offers you the unusual but cool ability to pause the action as you reposition the angle of one of your weapons. You weave your way through the massive 'grandmothership', dodging fire and taking out mechanical eyeballs, each one you take out allowing you to upgrade your ship.

tools are built in. You can just draw a sprite, make a jump sound, make a character jump in code and it is all automatically [put] together for you. No importing, no messing with data formats. It is just instantly usable. That is the lowest friction of any gamedev environment I've ever seen. You can just *make*. Getting from nothing to a finished little game is *fast*. I made a microgame for the *Picoware* game jam in an hour: graphics, sounds, code. I'm 16 again and making a simple little character move around the screen and do things, and the sense of simple, happy wonder of making a game all by yourself is back. It's glorious."

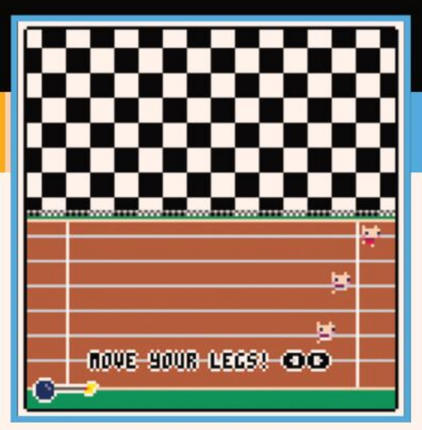
Tom also points to the openness of the platform as a massive plus. Because the Pico-8 uses a text format, it's easy to cut and paste code between projects, or even share with other people. Indeed, for any cartridge you can load up and play on the system, it's also possible to take a peak at the code, use it to make your own versions of the game (check out the multiple versions of *Celeste*) or just learn a trick or two.

In regards to the system's restrictions, Tom points to the phrase, "constraints breed creativity. It's true, because instantly there's a problem to solve, how do I do what I want, not on an endless blank canvas, but in this little, cosy space? It makes a lot of decisions for you, so you can concentrate on a small core loop and make it fun. As far as the retro game development feel, those harsh constraints feel familiar, like an old, favourite sweater."

» [Pico-8] Even professional developers are getting in on the act, as evidenced by this Pico-8 version of *Superhot*.

GAMES

IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO TRY OUT EVERY GAME AVAILABLE ON THE PICO-8, BUT WE'VE DONE OUR BEST TO PICK OUT SOME HIGHLIGHTS THAT SHOWCASE THE BREADTH OF THE HIGH-QUALITY TITLES YOU CAN FIND THERE



PICOWARE

■ As the name suggests, *Picoware* is a homage to the beloved *WarioWare*. Like Nintendo's title, it's a collection of tiny microgames – pick a nose, dunk a basketball, wake someone up and the list goes on. The game is made up of contributions from over 50 developers that all took part in a *Picoware* game jam that took place in 2019.

JACK OF SPADES

■ In this turn-based role-playing game, you have a hand of cards that you play to determine what abilities your party members use, the game allowing you to play multiple cards from the same suit in one turn. It's an excellent and intriguing mix of strategy and chance that feels like it could support a much larger game.

PAKPOK

■ This fun platformer has you playing as a little ladybird, awww. Through its 11 levels, you have to use the other bugs crawling around and their ability to launch you up into the air to help you progress. Relative to its short playtime, the game brings lots of new challenges and ideas to the table, which is rather surprising considering its length.

WINTERWOOD

■ A short adventure about travelling to an old man's house to return his lost dog whistle before a snowstorm hits. *Winterwood* does an amazing job of capturing the sense of disorientation that comes with being lost as you work your way through a confusing forest of trees. It will only take you ten minutes, so there's no reason not to give it a go.

WILLO

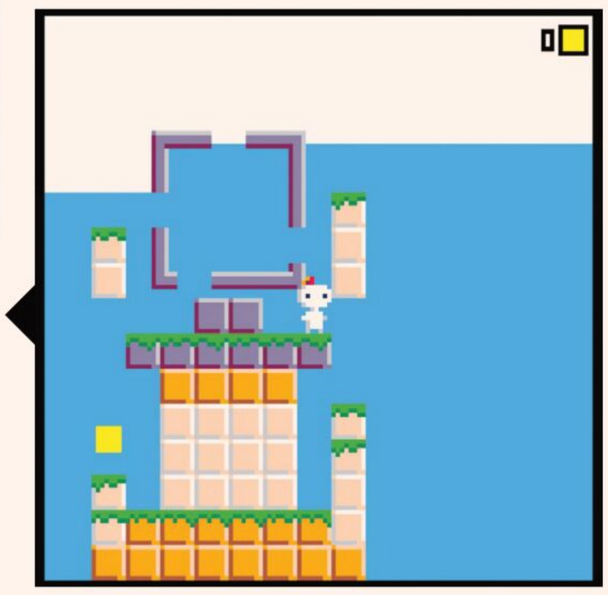
■ In this stealth game you control a spook trying to sneak his way past skeletons, blow out candles and get to the end of the level. Your ghostly "wooooooo" can be used to distract enemies and ratings encourage you to replay levels to optimise your runs. Could be one for speedrunners to have a go on, maybe at the next Games Done Quick event?

LIKE WHAT I (DE)MADE?

FANTASTIC LOW-FI VERSIONS OF WELL-KNOWN TITLES

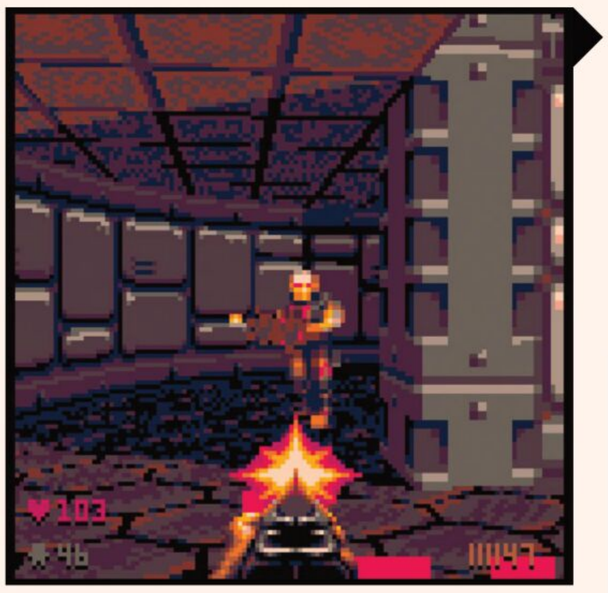
PICOWARS

This relatively faithful mini-version of Intelligent Systems' classic strategy game *Advance Wars* is fantastic fun. Rendered in an 8-bit style, the game uses the core mechanics of the title it is based on, including unit types, movement, capturing and so on, to great effect.



FUZ

Made in tribute to indie classic *Fez*, *Fuz* features the same world-rotating, cube-collecting gameplay that you'll find in the original title. With eight areas to visit, it's a compact and cosy take on the *Fez* that admirably captures the spirit of the original.



POOM

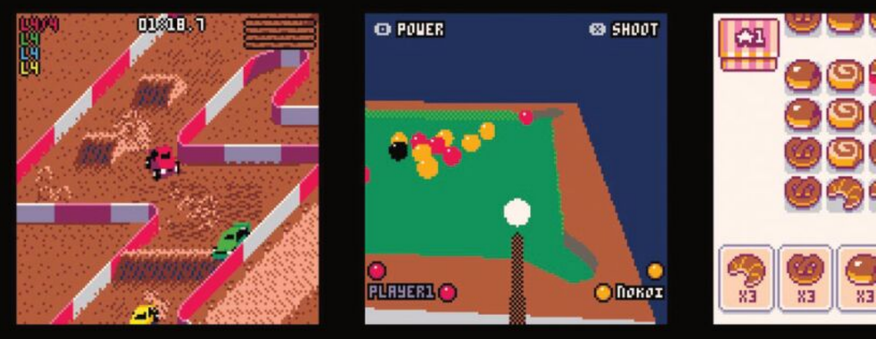
Because Pico-8 is a piece of technology that exists, it of course has to have a version of *Doom* on it. Though *Poom* isn't a faithful recreation of the original, it's still *Doom* enough to ensure that it still rocks and the low-fi version of the *Doom* theme still slaps.

LOW MEM SKY

We had to include this one for the technical achievement that emulates the scope of its source material, *No Man's Sky*. Like that title, *Low Mem Sky* is procedurally generated, creator Paul Nicholas claiming it offers around 180,383,121,450 star systems to explore as you collect and trade resources.

PICO ZOMBIE GARDEN: A PVZ DEMAKE

Plants Vs Zombies is, at its heart, a simple game – put down plants, have them shoot zombies before they get to you. That makes it the perfect candidate for a Pico-8 version. This demake has ten levels, eight types of plants and five types of zombie for you to contend with.

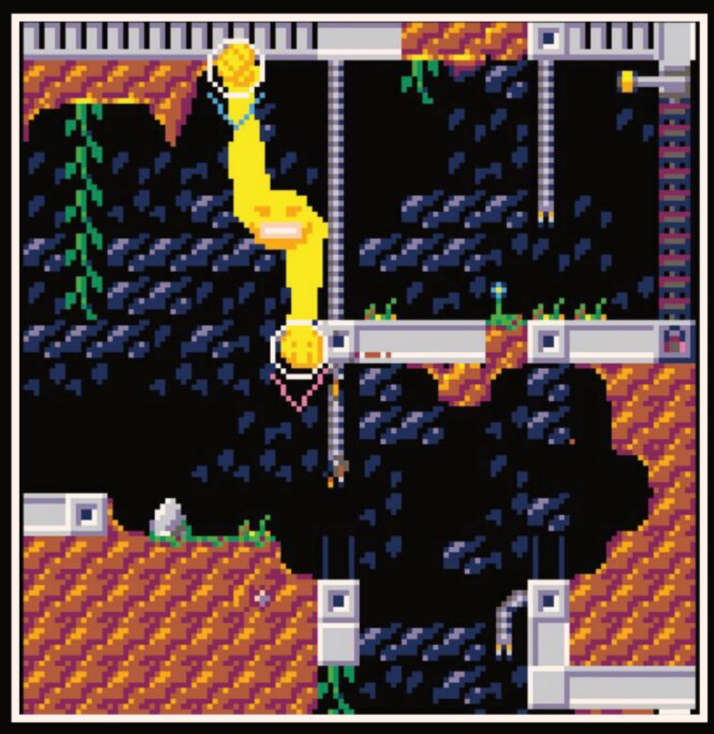


Outside of the system itself, Tom tells us that the community that has emerged around the Pico-8 is another of the big attractions. "Simply the nicest and most helpful community I've ever been a part of," he says. "Really nice, courteous, and will go out of their way to aid the Pico-8 newbie".

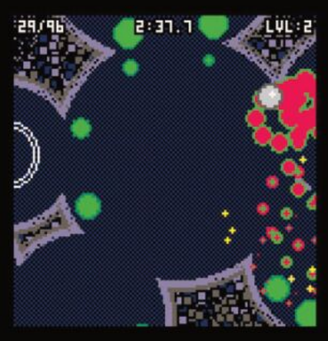
Indeed, there seems to be a culture around the Pico-8 of using it as a teaching tool. "Krystman has tutorials on Pico-8 under the LazyDevs name, and they are great," Tom says. "He also teaches and has students make games in Pico-8. Nerdy Teachers and MBoffin also have great tutorials that are an easy way in."

One member of that community of teachers is Chris Donnelly, also known as 'Gruber', though he focuses in on an entirely different dimension of the Pico-8. "I'm a professional musician," Chris tells us. "Up until about 2015 I was a piano-only musician. I wasn't really interested in gear and electronics. I was touring and I was performing, I was recording, trying

» [Pico-8] Game's like *Kelin's Delivery: Rain*, feel like stepping into a classic title from gaming's bygone days.



» [Pico-8] It's tricky to get used to *Grippy*'s innovative and clever control scheme, where each button controls the grip of the two arms you use to navigate levels.



to make that career path happen." However, Chris wasn't enjoying his work and questioned its sustainability, leading him to want to explore some new avenues.

Chris started looking for other ways of making music, becoming interested in electronic and videogame music. At the other end of the spectrum to Tom, Chris had no experience in making games before he encountered the Pico-8. He joined a videogame club in Toronto called DMG and here, he encountered the machine for the first time. "The first jam I ever go to they are explaining Pico-8. I wrote a few tunes in this jam. I played it and everyone was like, 'Wow, oh my gosh that's incredible how did you do that?,' and I was like, 'Well, I just kind of put in the notes,'" he laughs.

This would be just the first of many pieces of music he would end up composing on the Pico-8. "It was interesting how much of my progress was blocked by people, or lack of equipment, or money, or whatever, and with Pico-8 it was such a contrast that I could write something, share it with people right away and I could get the feedback from them which would inspire me to go back to it and write more. Within itself it is very accessible, to make sounds, organise sounds, change sounds and get the feedback."

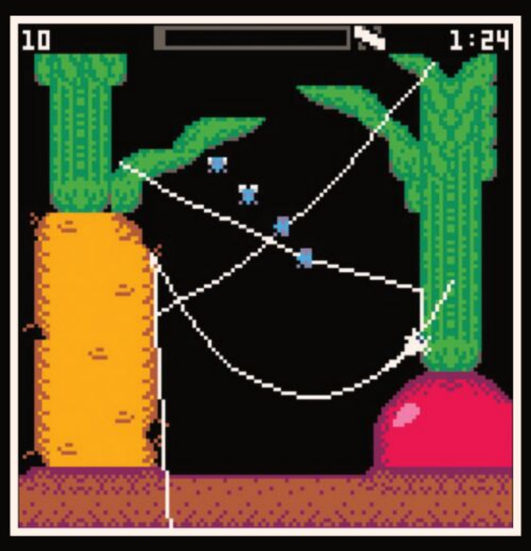
Chris' background in music gave him a valuable perspective that he wanted to bring to others using the tool he was having so much fun with. "What I discovered when I was first getting into Pico was that… this is a problem with developers that take all the burden is that you have a developer who doesn't have much experience writing music but they want to do it themselves and it's not as polished as the rest of their game. I wanted to help people," Chris explains. "I'm a piano teacher and that's part of my practice." He began creating tutorials on music composition and the Pico-8's music creation tools on his YouTube channel, Gruber. "I would try to figure out what the most common problems with people's music and people interacting with the tools and I would make a tutorial about it."

» [Pico-8] The cards you are dealt in *Jack Of Spades* give you real pause for thought when planning out your moves.

» [Pico-8] From *Star Wars* to *Star Trek*, series with dedicated fanbases will always be represented where there is user-created content.

Though Chris focuses on music specifically, his involvement with the Pico-8 is not untypical of the kind of the community in that he not only enjoys using the system, but is actively involved in helping others use it and, through his engagement with the community, has ended up working on the music for lots of games himself, including the aforementioned *Myrrh's Edge* and a new version of *Slipways*, a Pico-8 game following the *Celeste* route on its way to being a full-blown release on PC.

» [Pico-8] *8 Legs To Love* is a game where you have to build spiderwebs and catch flies. As you can see, we suck at it.



It's fascinating to discover that, though he comes from a completely different field and level of experience when it comes to making games than someone like Tom, what he gets out of working with the Pico-8 is almost identical.

"There's a directness in how you can create, how you interact with composition because of the limitations. You're almost always directing your attention to how a composition is flowing and how you can create form. You open up Abelton, and you're just like, 'Oh I've got bit crushers, I've got chorus, I've got flangers, I've got amps and overdrive.' That can be very overwhelming. That's what I liked about Pico-8 when I was first getting into writing videogame music, that it's so focused."

"It's a theme that's going to come up a lot when you are talking with people in the community," Chris continues, suggesting that this commonalty is a testament to what Joseph has achieved in designing the machine. "Whether you're dealing just with code, or just with pixel art, or just music, or all three, it's quite a design feat that you can have those three fields and people who interact in those three ways have the same comment: the structure gives me focus and freedom." ✱

Hardware Heaven

ESSENTIAL GAME
Batman Forever

None of the R-Zone cartridges offer a great deal of impressive gameplay, so we're choosing here based on significance to the system. Since *Batman Forever* was the original pack-in, and therefore one of the most common games, it's really the one we should highlight. As the caped crusader, your job is to wander along the rooftops, punching enemies in the face as they attack from the front or behind, while jumping over wrecking balls and gaps between buildings. It's very basic and the sound is ear-splitting, but it somehow manages to be more fun than *Batman & Robin* on Tiger's Game.com.

R-Zone fact

■ Because the R-Zone was often sold in a plastic blister pack, which would inevitably be destroyed upon opening, our 'boxed' price reflects that of brand-new and sealed units.

PROCESSORS: NONE
RAM: NONE
GRAPHICS: NONE
AUDIO: MONOTONE BEEPER
MEDIA: DEDICATED CARTRIDGE CONTAINING ALL GAME LOGIC AND DISPLAY

R-Zone

» **MANUFACTURER:** Tiger Electronics » **YEAR:** 1995
» **COST:** £33.99 (launch), £100+ (today, boxed), £30+ (today, unboxed)

Give it points for style, at least – there's no doubting that Tiger's R-Zone has a unique look. The unit consists of a mirrored visor attached to a headband, and looks just about as futuristic as any mid-Nineties kid could have hoped for, in much the same way as Konami's Laserscope attempted to a few years earlier. Unfortunately, that's just about the best thing you can really say about the R-Zone, other than that you'll recognise licensed names like *Virtua Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat 3* and *Men In Black*.

The R-Zone hosted exactly the same sorts of LCD games that Tiger had become well known for, but sold as cartridges rather than dedicated handheld units. Essentially, the R-Zone unit just provided power, sound output and controls, as the cartridges themselves contained all the game information and their own dedicated displays. A red light was shone through the LCD to give the final visual display – with all the redness of the Virtual Boy, but none of its impressive depth of field effects. The R-Zone would be released in a few different guises, including a more conventional handheld console, a tabletop unit and even a PDA-style device, but it never really took off as hoped. ✱

SYSTEM SUPPLIED BY
EVAN AMOS

THE MAKING OF

Shantae™

IF YOU HAD THREE WISHES, WOULD YOU USE ONE OF THEM TO INTERVIEW MATT BOZON, CO-CREATOR OF SHANTAE, ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF HIS BELOVED ACTION-ADVENTURE SERIES? NO? OH. WELL, WE DID. GET READY TO (HAIR) WHIP IT GOOD AS WE SAVE A DANCE FOR SHANTAE

WORDS BY STUART GIPP

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM
- **DEVELOPER:** WAYFORWARD
- **RELEASED:** 2002
- **PLATFORM:** NINTENDO GAME BOY COLOR
- **GENRE:** ACTION ADVENTURE

When it comes to classic gaming, it seems as though education is a must, according to *Shantae* series director and WayForward creative director Matt Bozon. "As kids we all strove for straight As so we could cash our report cards in at Showbiz Pizza to get [game] tokens, which we'd drop on games of *Frogger*, *Donkey Kong* and *Spy Hunter*." This steady old-school diet continued at home with Atari 2600 titles like *River Raid* and *Pitfall!*, before inevitably moving onto the NES and *The Legend Of Zelda*, *Metroid* and *Castlevania* – games from which *Shantae* seems to take more direct inspiration.

Matt first met future wife (and creator of *Shantae*) Erin Bell Bozon at the famed California Institute Of The Arts (CalArts), while both were enrolled in the character animation program and immersed in the early SNES releases – *ActRaiser*, *A Link To The Past*, etc. "Videogames weren't really an established job path at the time for animators, so I feel like we both sort of stumbled into it." Mutual friend of Erin and Matt, Rob Buchanan, brought them in on a freelance job working for Voldi Way – a 'one-man studio' who had formed a small team (WayForward Games) to develop 1994 edutainment title *Mickey's Ultimate Challenge* for SNES. Both joined the staff a few years later, where over 50 games were developed and shipped prior to beginning work on *Shantae* – many of which were education products based on the likes of The Berenstain Bears and Casper, but others were more inspiring. "A lot of these early games were exciting to work on," remembers Matt, "because we were able to introduce iconic characters into gaming for the first time, such as The Muppets and some of the early Marvel Super Heroes products. But I really wanted to get back to Nintendo and make something more like the games I'd grown up with."

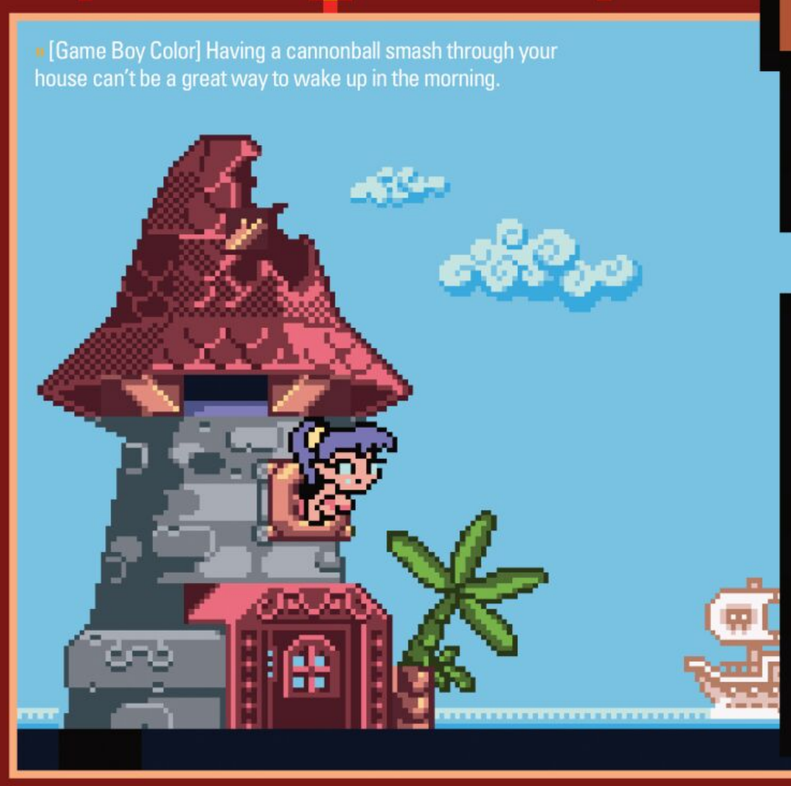
WayForward was initially co-owned by an educational company, but when the initial CD-ROM bubble burst said arrangement came to an end. "Voldi refocused the studio on games," Matt recalls. "We grew from half a dozen to around 20 employees." Within this small studio, Matt formed a two-person group known as The Pocket Team, focusing exclusively on Game Boy software – work for hire on games such as *WWF: Betrayal* and *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*. Eventually this team expanded, and their first original title was the 2000 release, *Xtreme*

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SIGMA STAR SAGA
SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE
YEAR: 2005

CONTRA 4 (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS
YEAR: 2007

DOUBLE DRAGON NEON (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: XBOX 360/ PLAYSTATION 3/PC
YEAR: 2012



» [Game Boy Color] Having a cannonball smash through your house can't be a great way to wake up in the morning.

Sports, "a sort of self-parody sports RPG". With programmer Jimmy Huey available, the time was right to start working on *Shantae* – a pitch from Erin back in the CalArts days that was originally proposed as a Super NES and then a PC title – now to be developed as a Game Boy Color game over a span of two years. A belly-dancing, hair-whipping genie that transformed into different animals in order to assist in navigating the game world, the character was undeniably game-ready.

» [PC] Matt Bozon, co-creator and director of the *Shantae* series.

The now-iconic genie's first adventure took direct inspiration from *Super Metroid*. "*Shantae* would change forms that granted traversal abilities and new attacks, and featured a female hero like Samus," Matt explains. "The level design and game structure were inspired by *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* – only turned on its side." Inspirations outside the world of gaming included manga like *Ranma ½* and *Nadia: Secret Of Blue Water*. "Considering that her origins are inspired by Samus," adds Matt, "you can imagine our excitement at seeing Shantae appear as Samus Aran's 'Spirit' in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*!"

Ultimately, a lofty expectation was set for *Shantae*. "Our goal was to raise the animation bar and try to technically surpass anything that had been made on handheld up to that point," Matt says. Inspired by the "drool-worthy" animation of *Metal Slug*, *Darkstalkers* and *Earthworm Jim*, the Game Boy Color was pushed to its limits by Jimmy. "We were determined to match the Neo Geo Pocket Color in animation quality, and see if we could push even more colours by layering sprites," Matt continues. "[Jimmy] found ways to get more tiles, colours and even the illusions of parallax scrolling and translucency using age-old and often impractical tricks from his Vic-20 and Apple II days. If we could imagine it, Jimmy would find a way to do it!" Looking at the original *Shantae* it's difficult to argue that Jimmy and WayForward didn't pull off their stated goal – few Game Boy Color titles even come close to the quality of its visuals.

» [Game Boy Color] A heavy cannonball to the face barely fazes our heroine. A little foundation will cover that bruise.

» [Game Boy Color] The way the palette fades into flaming, flickering fiery colour here remains impressive to this day.

» [Game Boy Color] You can visit this dance parlour at night to rack up the gems. Unless you're rubbish, of course.

SHEER GENIUS

MEET THE MANY FORMS OF SHANTAE

MONKEY FORM

■ **Shantae's quite adorable little monkey form allows her to zip around as a much smaller target, not to mention scale sheer walls with a frankly reckless abandon. Given the small screen and tendency for enemies to leap out of nowhere, it's easy to accidentally blunder into them and take an unnecessary hit.**

ELEPHANT FORM

■ **Besides a remarkable boost to her memory, Shantae's elephantine form allows her to aggressively bash through certain barriers – she can even reduce rock-based monsters to rubble in a single hit. The trade-off, though, is exceptionally slow movement and a low jump height.**

SPIDER FORM

■ **This turns Shantae into an eight-legged freak with the ability to climb walls in the background as well as scuttle up and down handily-placed webs that often lead the way to collectable Fireflies. Handy, but probably the most situation specific of the transformations.**

HARPY FORM

■ **You can fly! Rather negating the utility of the Monkey and Spider forms, this lets you swoop through the air in the guise of that hideous mythological creature, the harpy. Useful for travelling back through the game and mopping up secrets and items.**

▶ Still, this wasn't easy to achieve, given the limitations of the GBC. "It's hard to explain," says Matt, "but when forced to consider everything on-screen as a real-time jigsaw puzzle it can really bring out the best in developers." The game world in *Shantae* is made of 8x8 pixel tiles, but was optimised on enormous 256x256 'mega tiles'. It's similar to *The Legend Of Zelda*, where "entire rooms could be stamped down as gigantic tiles, making for a bigger world".

The technical feats didn't end there. "Enemies were also designed to use multiple sprites that would never exceed ten sprites on any given horizontal scanline," explains Matt. "That meant their designs and every individual frame of their animation has to fit into an ever-changing Tetromino-like arrangement." Monsters' attack patterns are designed to avoid each other's scanlines, allowing the sprites to display. "Palette shifting, collision tiles and the lost art of individual tile prioritising were all put to use," Matt says. "It was fun figuring out how to get the most from every pixel, tile and colour index."

» [Game Boy Color] Bolo here is a bit of a berk. Still, he does open up Dribble Fountain for Shantae.

Before the fruits of these labours could be shared with the world, though, *Shantae* needed a publisher, and Matt pitched it to industry titans Capcom at E3 "figuring it was a long shot". But the team were "beyond thrilled" when CEO John Beck informed them that he'd signed a deal with Capcom, who had liked the look of *Shantae* and its similarities to its own game *Mega Man Xtreme*. "After that, Capcom were hands off, but they were a huge help getting the game into stores. As it turned out, we'd been a bit too ambitious with the game," admits Matt. The amount of animation, music, levels and the save battery required the most expensive Game Boy Color cartridge that Nintendo could manufacture, which Matt notes may have scared retailers off, but Capcom had a bright idea. "[They] did some clever distribution to get the pricey cartridge into stores. I heard that *Shantae* shared a shipping container with *Resident Evil Gaiden*, making it more attractive to retailers. So Shantae might owe some of her success to Leon S Kennedy and Barry Burton!"

Notably, *Shantae* was eventually released in 2002 – a full year after development had completed but, more crucially, at a time that the Game Boy Advance was already well-established on shop shelves. "We were concerned that Capcom may want to cancel the game if the rumoured 'Project Atlantis' [a GBA-like system that never came to fruition] suddenly became real," admits Matt. WayForward was working on the now-shockingly expensive *Wendy: Every Witch Way*, a Game Boy Color title intended to link with a cartoon series that never saw the light of day. In order to elevate the status of the orphaned game with its publisher, WayForward added extra levels which unlocked if the cartridge detected that it had been inserted into a GBA. "We did the same for *Shantae*," reveals Matt, "though we didn't have any cartridge

GENIUS SEQUELS

THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF SHANTAE

SHANTAE: RISKY'S REVENGE

■ **Shantae's second adventure is an easy-breezy quest through a mere two major dungeons, but it packs some of the best sprite work seen on the Nintendo DS thanks to the input of the absolute pixel artisan Henk Nieborg. Not a bad game by any means, but it feels compressed and compromised.**

SHANTAE AND THE PIRATE'S CURSE

■ **Often considered the best game in the series, *Pirate's Curse* eschews Shantae's transformations in favour of pieces of pirate gear that grant her new attacks and traversal abilities. The areas are separated into different islands this time, each with a miniature Metroidvania-like map to explore.**

SHANTAE: HALF-GENIE HERO

■ **The result of a successful Kickstarter, *Half-Genie Hero* is a bit of a departure for the series, not only being more linear than preceding games but also being the first to launch on home consoles. It's a good time, though, with the best soundtrack in the series from Jake Kaufman and a lot of modes and content.**

SHANTAE AND THE SEVEN SIRENS

■ ***Seven Sirens* returns the series to its traditional Metroidvania structure, but is otherwise more of the same – hardly a bad thing when your baseline quality is well above average. This episodic title launched in 2019 on the Apple Arcade service before arriving in its completed form on all formats the following year.**

space to spare so couldn't unlock extra levels like the ones added to *Wendy*. We were able to just barely squeeze in the Tinkerbat transformation and brighter colours for the non-backlit GBA."

Critics and gamers were kind to *Shantae* – as well they should have been, as it remains an impressive game to this day. "*Nintendo Power* magazine rated us similarly to *Super Mario Sunshine* that month, so we felt pretty good about that!" adds Matt. "It was very rare to hear from fans back then, but we'd receive a few pieces of fan art or handwritten letters. We really treasured those and still have them after all this time." With the rise of social media it's a lot easier to be in touch with players, and *Shantae* certainly has a large, committed fanbase. Matt reflected on why this is, "The games are fun and light hearted, they speak the same sort of videogame language as the products that inspired them. But beyond this, Shantae herself is an endearing character. She's such a joyful, kind-hearted, playful and relatable character that I think it's hard not to love her. She fights for what's right, admits when she's wrong, and keeps moving forward with the help of her friends and family."

As *Shantae* was entering the last stages of its development, the team at WayForward began working on the movie tie-in *The Scorpion King*, which laid the groundwork for the never-completed *Shantae Advance*. "Capcom also gave us a Dolphin dev kit to encourage a GameCube sequel, but work-for-hire jobs led us almost entirely into the handheld space after that," continues Matt.

Thankfully, the advent of Nintendo's DSiWare service led to the eventual 2010 sequel *Shantae: Risky's Revenge*, which was itself followed by *Shantae & The Pirate's Curse* on the Nintendo 3DS in 2014. Following these, a successful Kickstarter campaign saw the series leap to home consoles two years later with *Shantae: Half-Genie Hero*, an expansive and attractive take on the character with 2.5D graphics reminiscent of WayForward's seminal *DuckTales Remastered*. Last year saw the release of *Shantae And The Seven Sirens*, which – alongside playable cameos in the likes of *Blaster Master Zero* and *Runbow* – has kept the character in the popular consciousness.

With the original *Shantae*'s recent release on the Nintendo Switch, the entire five-game series is now available on the hybrid console, a fact that Matt is understandably enthusiastic about. "Having every game appear on Switch is fantastic, especially when you consider that each game was built on very different technology by different teams of talented people over a 20-year span. It's fun to jump in and out of each game just to see how the series has changed. It's also a reminder of the fans who have supported *Shantae* all this time and allowed us to keep making these games. Some of them started out as youngsters and are all grown up and making creative content of their own. I hope that *Shantae* will continue to put a smile on the faces of players all over the world for years to come!"

Looking at the growth of the series from its already-impressive roots – not to mention its continued enthusiasm from its passionate fanbase – we can safely say that wish is very likely to come true. ★

» [Game Boy Color] The Advanced Genies gift Shantae with the very useful Tinkerbat transformation.

» [Game Boy Color] Nothing about this situation seems like it's going to end well. Time to farm some healing hearts.

AJAX	1
IFK GÖTEBORG	2

European Super League

"I'VE NEVER SEEN A BAG OF MONEY SCORE A GOAL"

» Dreamcast » 2001 » Coyote Developments

When I heard the news about the proposed formation of a European Super League in football recently, I was decidedly unhappy, as I'm sure many of you were. It was particularly unpleasant as a Spurs fan, as not only did it mean my club was part of a very unpleasant movement that betrayed the core principles of the sport, but I had to endure all the (quite accurate) jabs about how unimpressive our trophy cabinet has been. But this vision of a dismal future ended up causing me to reminisce about a more vibrant, competitive past – not in the actual sport of course, but in videogames.

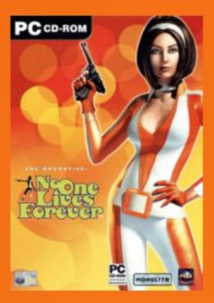
You see, my first reaction was a stupid joke about this old Dreamcast game. I bought *European Super League* years ago with the intent to review it for my old Dreamcast website, but never got around to it. When I finally did play it I realised that it was essentially an evolution of *Viva Football*, a PlayStation game that I hadn't enjoyed very much. It's not dreadful or anything, but if I want to play a Dreamcast football game I'm going to go for *UEFA Dream Soccer* or *Virtua Striker 2* depending on my mood, so I ended up selling it on because it's worth more than most old sports games.

But while I was thinking about it, it struck me that both of those games at least tried to have a unique angle on the game – *Viva Football* allowed you to play past World Cup tournaments and even pit historical teams against each other, while *European Super League* sought to replicate a concept that has earned a lot of press over the decades. Other competing games had distinctive ideas too. On the PlayStation, *Libero Grande* had you play as a single player, while the aforementioned *UEFA Dream Soccer* included women's teams – a real rarity back then. With the videogame football market now dominated by a rich perpetual winner, it feels like we're long past the era when distinctive ideas matter – nobody's buying a football game without Ultimate Team. Isn't that kind of sad? ✱

THE MAKING OF No One Lives Forever 1&2

DISCOVER HOW A CEASE-AND-DESIST FROM THE OWNERS OF JAMES BOND LED TO CATE ARCHER, THE HERO OF MONOLITH'S CULT SPY SERIES

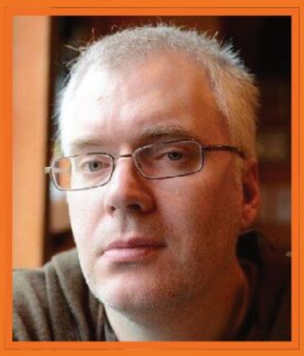
WORDS BY ROBERT ZAK



IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
- **DEVELOPER:** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS
- **RELEASED:** 2000, 2002
- **PLATFORM:** PC, PS2
- **GENRE:** FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



CRAIG HUBBARD

■ After *No One Lives Forever 2*, Craig continued working at Monolith on its seminal first-person shooter *FEAR* and its first sequel, released in 2009. He is currently a game director at Sharkmob – a relatively new studio made up of industry veterans – where he's working on a secret project.

JEFF ORKIN

■ Jeff stayed at Monolith to play a leading role engineering the incredible AI of *FEAR*. He then did a PhD at MIT, which turned into a start-up called Giant Otter, an AI studio whose tech learns behaviour and dialogue from humans. Jeff's dream is to make it big in marketing, so he "can fund crazy experimental game AI projects someday."

The late Nineties were a pioneering time for first-person shooters, but also a time when these early 3D games were all slathered in dark, rusty colour palettes. Then, like an expressionistic splattering of rainbow paints in a drab industrial control room, sassy Sixties-themed shooter *No One Lives Forever* shook things up in 2000.

The radicality of this game and its 2002 sequel went far beyond their swinging stylings. They were story-driven and sharply written, they offered freedom of approach in tackling objectives and the sequel introduced an AI system that laid the foundations for *FEAR* – a game that's lauded to this day as one of the best implementations of enemy AI in videogames.

1998-1999 was a prolific period for developer Monolith Productions (see our feature on the early years of Monolith in issue 219). The studio released no fewer than nine games in that time, during which it also began development on *No One Lives Forever*. Working out of a huge multi-building complex in Kirkland, Washington, the studio's rapid expansion and wealth of simultaneous projects was largely fuelled by its big-thinking cofounder Jason Hall – which came with its perks and drawbacks.

Hall, along with several of the founders, was an audiophile, which meant that Monolith had its very own sound studio on-site. Monolith cofounder Toby Gladwell tells us, "Jason was always very big on audio and one way in which Monolith was ahead of its time was that our audio was always really good, and music well-scored." The crisp dialogue and Guy Whitmore's excellent soundtrack for *No One Lives Forever* were born from this obsession for acoustics.

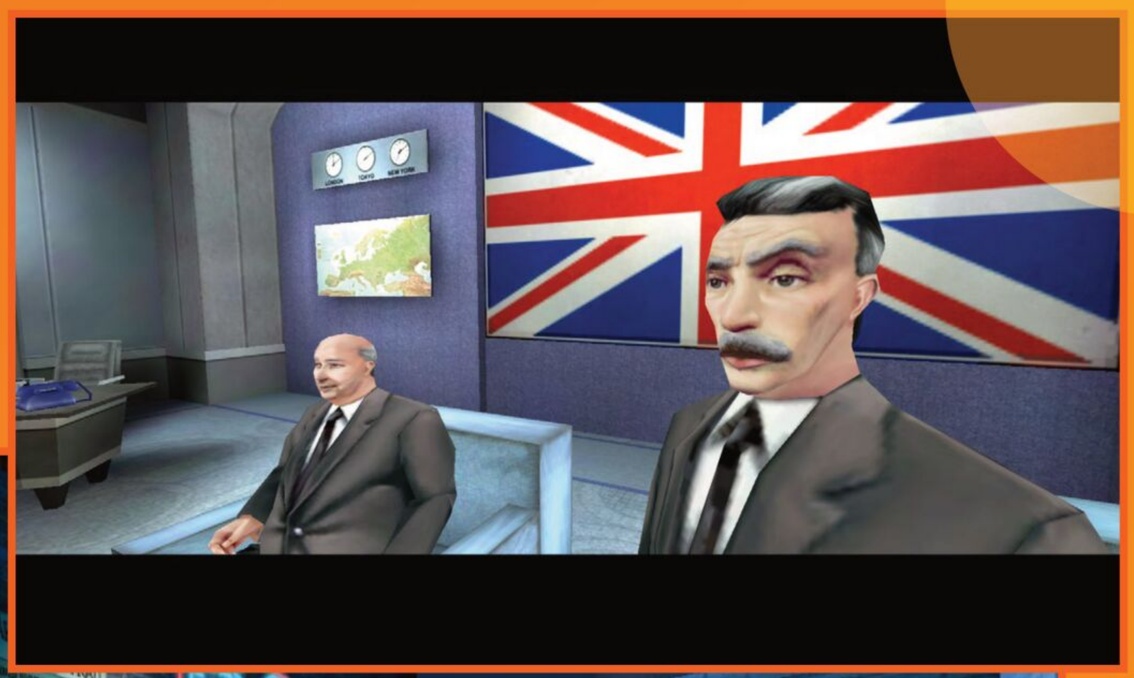
But the obsession with 'going big' meant that certain basic amenities could get seriously overlooked, as *No One Lives Forever 2* AI engineer Jeff Orkin reveals. "Monolith was really scrappy in those days before the Warner Bros acquisition," he recalls. "The office was not in great shape, and the bathroom across from my office overflowed somewhat regularly."

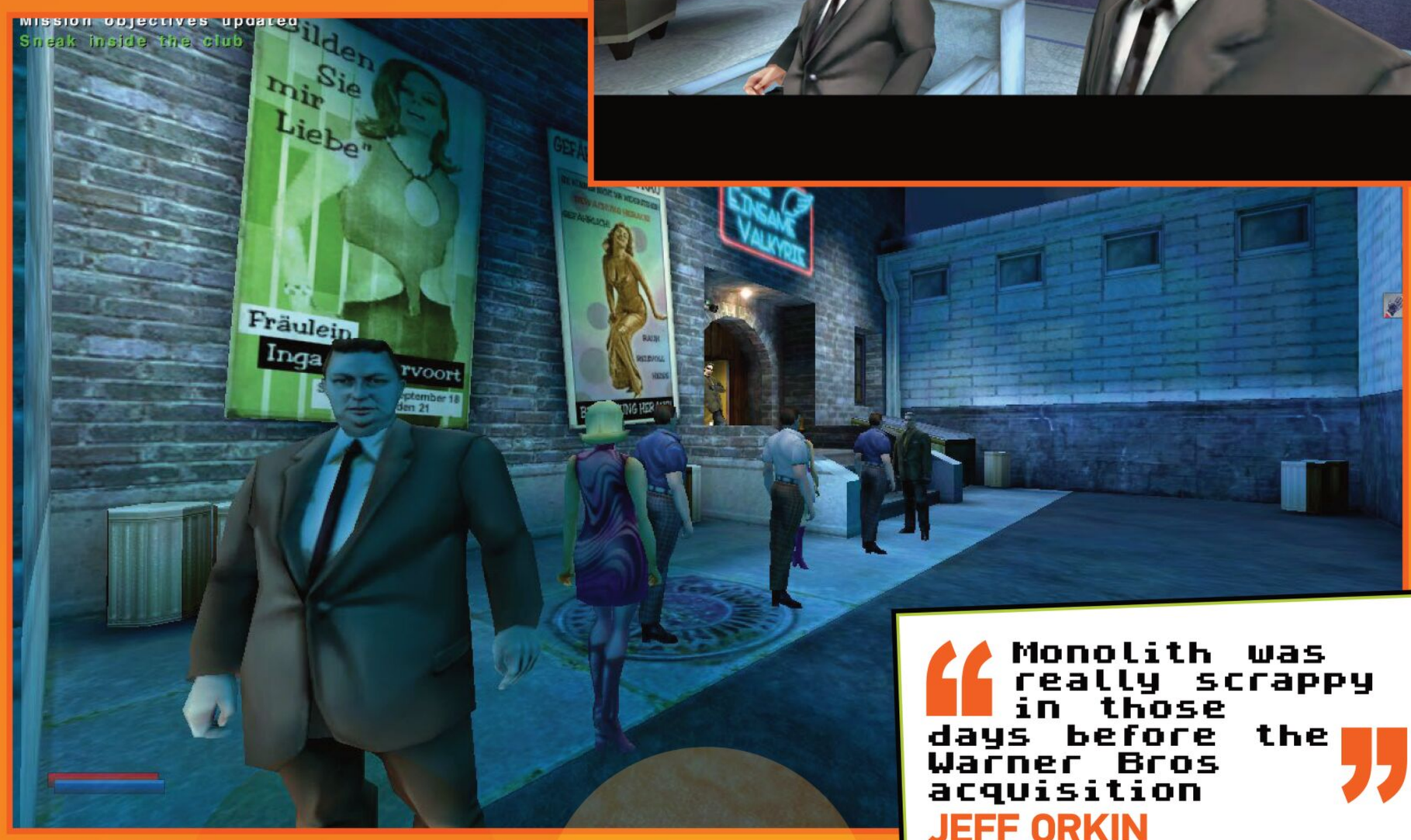
Amidst the projects and toilet turmoils of Monolith circa 1998, work began on *No One Lives Forever*, with designer Craig Hubbard brought on to lead a team of 18 people. It all began with a simple premise: action-movie game.

Monolith's previous game *Shogo: Mobile Armor Division* – an anime-inspired game with gundams – was a critical darling but commercial failure. In classic Monolith style, this motivated the studio to try something completely different rather than play it safe, and early plans for a *Shogo* sequel morphed into what would eventually become *No One Lives Forever*. "One of the first ideas we came up with was a sequence aboard a doomed airliner that ends with you skydiving and stealing a parachute, which survived to make it into the game," Craig recalls.

Talks within the development team gradually shifted the theme from action movie to Sixties spy thriller. The late Nineties were a bit of a ▶ postmodern golden age for the spy thriller, with

» [PC] Archer has to overcome a steady barrage of sexism and mistrust from her peers and superiors, but they all get what's coming to 'em.





» [PC] The original game introduced some of the liveliest settings in a shooter since *Duke Nukem 3D*.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BLOOD (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC
YEAR: 1997, 2019 (REMASTER)

FEAR
SYSTEM: PC, PS3, XBOX 360
YEAR: 2005

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR
SYSTEM: PC, PS4, XBOX ONE
YEAR: 2014

> "Monolith was really scrappy in those days before the Warner Bros acquisition"
> JEFF ORKIN

▶ Pierce Brosnan's *Bond* movies poking fun at a formula that had grown staid in preceding years, and of course *Austin Powers* turning the genre into Sixties-themed slapstick. It was a great time to get a bit silly with the premise.

But Monolith's inspirations came from lesser-known examples of spy-themed shlock. "We started prototyping a more stealth-oriented experience with gadgets, but it was still modern day at that point," says Craig. "Then I saw *The Avengers* with Ralph Fiennes and Uma Thurman, which was a bad movie with a great aesthetic and cool soundtrack, so I pitched a similarly retro-futuristic, high-tech Sixties vibe, which we explored for a while." It also transpired that producer Chris Miller was a fan of *Modesty Blaise* and other campy spy-fi classics.

» [PC] The first mission of the sequel is possibly the prettiest in the series, giving you free roam of a traditional Japanese village at sunset.

» [PC] The sequel offered more opportunities for stealth, leading to satisfying assassination scenarios like this.

> "I was re-reading a scene between the player character and a love interest and it hit me that all we had to do was reverse the roles"
> **CRAIG HUBBARD**

The series' iconic frontwoman Cate Archer was conceived quite far down the line, after the original direction of the game – starring a male protagonist – was met with a cease-and-desist from *James Bond* IP holder MGM. As the team struggled to find a less overtly Bondian, angle for the game, the breakthrough came when Craig decided to quite literally flip the script.

"One day I was re-reading a scene I'd sketched between the player character and a female love interest and it suddenly hit me that all we had to do was reverse the roles and it would suddenly feel completely fresh," he tells us. "I think we were all a bit nervous about whether a female protagonist was a good idea for an FPS considering the overwhelmingly male audience in those days, but we decided to go ahead with it."

It was the right choice. Cate Archer was sharp, subversive and steadfast in the face of grave danger as well as the steady drone of sexism. Through Archer, the developers got to explore themes that would have been overlooked had the hero been male, and were remarkably progressive even by today's standards.

Archer has to contend with the dismissive attitude of Smith, her superior at her spy agency UNITY, who only sends her out into the field because all other (male) operatives are dead. Smith is quick to attribute the agency's failings to the fact that they "put a woman on the job", and refuses to acknowledge Archer's successes. Add to this the chauvinistic condescension of her fellow agent Tom Goodman, and Archer has to put up with a lot of shit to prove her worth – as if the spectacular feats and high body counts you amass throughout the game aren't enough.

Archer gives as good as she gets with the sexist jabs, never getting flustered or frustrated. She is attractive without relying on hypersexualisation (at a time when Lara Croft was still burdened with DDs in *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* while Angelina Jolie was padding her chest for her role in the 2001 *Tomb Raider* movie). "I really loved the idea that Archer was this competent, self-assured badass who couldn't get credit for her accomplishments but also got the blame for others' mistakes," Craig tells us.

Throughout 1999, *No One Lives Forever* was being developed with the kind of energy that typified many burgeoning studios. There was little management, a lot of ambition and an uncontainable amount of creativity. *No One Lives Forever* was something of a crossroads project for Monolith. It was the game where Monolith's in-house LithTech engine was really starting to shine, and the studio pared back its operations as a publisher and motion-capture studio to focus purely on making games.

Yet the chaotic creativity was still there. *No One Lives Forever* had a lot of ideas in it, but many of them, such as stealth, weren't quite fully formed. One of Craig's all-time favourite games is *Thief: The Dark Project*, which is evident in the way walking speed and different surfaces affect the amount of noise you make in *No One Lives Forever*. Likewise, the silenced pistol was a rewarding and lethal way to play the game.

But as soon as you were spotted, the game reverted into an all-out shooter. That's because, according to Craig "there was no easy way to implement 'recoverable stealth' with the tools we had for the first game".

Craig is candid about the things that didn't quite click in *No One Lives Forever*. "By far the thing I regret most is that I didn't yet understand the importance of external playtesting," he tells us. "We had a couple of insta-fail stealth sequences that were insanely hard." He attributes its long and verbose cutscenes to the fact that he wrote the script and created the scenes very late in the project. "As I was implementing, I realised it was a lot for players to sit through, but it was too late to address."

Thankfully, Craig would get a chance to tie up the game's loose ends. *No One Lives Forever* was critically lauded upon release in 2000, and sold well enough to justify a sequel.

For a game released just two years after its predecessor, *No One Lives Forever 2* made huge strides in almost every area. Levels were now non-linear, giving you free roam of large areas like the Siberian wastes, urban Calcutta and a Japanese village.

An RPG-lite levelling system was also introduced, whereby you gathered intel to amass points that you could distribute into attributes like stealth, weapon damage and gadgetry. This allowed you to effectively have different ▶

» [PC] Investigating the abandoned house of a dead HARM agent is one of the series' more atmospheric sequences.

CATE ARCHER'S GROOVY GADGETRY

OUR TOP PICKS FROM THE MOST OUT-THERE ARSENAL IN VIDEOGAMES

P-421 CANINE PERSUADER

Like in so many games, dogs can be the swift undoing of an otherwise valiant attempt at stealthy operations. Luckily, Cate can use this persuasive mechanical poodle to woo guard dogs while she sneaks past them and avoids getting chomped by them.

ANGRY KITTY

The sequel introduces a more lethal domestic pet doppelgänger to Archer's arsenal. Place the Angry Kitty on the ground, and it will go for a stroll, meowing to attract the attention of guards. Once it detects a guard, it surges towards them before exploding.

BODY REMOVER

This one's kind of nasty. Contained in a perfume bottle, this spray dissolves dead bodies instantly, which is a very handy disposal method. We just hope Cate is clipping her nose with her free hand to avoid breathing in those sizzling human fumes…

FUZZY SLIPPERS

Have you ever tried crouch-walking? The burn in your thighs is utterly intolerable, so if you're looking to be stealthy a much more comfortable solution is to wear pink fluffy slippers adorned with cat faces.

LIPSTICK SPY CAMERA

A hip Sixties lady has to have her lipstick, a Sixties spy has to have their hidden camera, so why not combine the two? The beauty of this gadget is in the animation, as Archer twists the lipstick into a camera with a satisfying 'click'.

HAIRSPRAY WELDER

Unfortunately, this can of hairspray doesn't double up as a tear gas canister, but it makes up for it by letting Agent Archer cut her way through anything from a wire fence to steel door bolts. Nothing stops Cate.

MASCARA STUN GUN

Guards will go weak at the knees and collapse in a spasmodic pile once Archer's done with this mascara. Note that KOed enemies will eventually get back up, but you can dissolve their bodies while they're snoozing. [Yuck - Ed]

CODE-BREAKING MIRROR

If any guards question why a woman is loitering around right next to a security panel – why, just powdering her nose, of course! If her makeup mirror happens to help infiltrate a terrorist organisation, then that's just incidental.

BARRETTE LOCK PICK

The manual equivalent to the makeup mirror, this multi-coloured teardrop barrette conveniently doubles as a lockpick. Break in through a door, clip it back in your hair and you're away. See? You just can't stop Cate.

ARCHER LIVES FOREVER

PLAY THE SERIES FOR FREE ON MODERN PCS THANKS TO THE NOLF REVIVAL PROJECT

For reasons so mysterious that neither its makers or IP owners (most recently Activision) have all the answers, neither *No One Lives Forever* nor its sequel are available to buy digitally. However, thanks to the release of the game's source code in 2001, fans have done what big companies failed to, and made *No One Lives Forever 1, 2* and even *Contract JACK* available for free – fully functioning on modern systems.

The good people at nolfrevival.tk thankfully have bundled each game with all official patches, community patches, widescreen support, high resolutions and even multiplayer support (so you can at long last play those fabled co-op missions).

If you want to get the games running even better, then you should download the *NOLF 1* and *2 'Modernizer'* packs by modder HeyThereCoffeee, which squash various bugs and cap the games at 60fps, eliminating strange issues that appear on high refresh-rate displays.

builds for Archer – a combination of high Search skill with high Armor skill, for instance, would eventually turn you into an infallible behemoth, feeding off perma-spawning guards for an endless supply of super-powerful armour.

Crucially, the game became far less scripted and more systems-driven, thanks in large part to the work of AI engineer Jeff Orkin. "I inherited Brian Long's work from the first game," Jeff tells us. "I had a tight timeline to adapt the original game's AI to be more goal-driven, emergent and autonomous, without breaking any of the stuff that was already working really well."

NPCs now had semi-randomised routines – they'd go to the bathroom, wash their hands, do some desk work, or go outside for a smoke. They would respond to emergent situations that you created for them and – in one of the series' many darkly comical systems – would dispose of fellow guards' bodies by dissolving them with a spray, just so their superiors wouldn't know things went wrong on their watch.

The newly emergent AI opened up plenty of room for player expression. Knock out your fellow agent Yamata-san at the start of the Japan mission, carry him into the middle of the village and wait for him to wake up, and just watch as he swiftly disposes of any enemy ninjas that attack him. Trigger an alarm, and a guard who happens to be on the toilet will politely flush before running out to meet the threat, while a sleeping guard will jump up faster than they would if they were just starting their shift.

A more nuanced system of alertness made stealth more viable too. "A single disturbance might not warrant any further action, says Jeff. "Instead, a character can keep track of what he has observed and respond after enough occurrences have accumulated. A single bottle knocked over might not be cause for alarm, but ten broken bottles might be very alarming."

Craig Hubbard's dream of recoverable stealth was also realised. Beyond the work of Jeff and the rest of the AI team, Monolith had a certain pioneer of the stealth genre to thank. "I ended up playing *Metal Gear Solid* after we shipped the first game and it really underscored the bad decisions I'd made when it came to stealth gameplay," Craig says. "*MGS* was hugely influential on the stealth mechanics and game structure of the sequel."

No One Lives Forever 2 is a good-looking game, with less rigid character animations and less boxy environments than the first game. "For the original we were using *Quake*-like tools to build real-world locations," explains Craig. "The new renderer liberated us, which is why the sequel holds up OK visually."

You feel these refinements in the environments, which are not only bigger and more natural looking, but also offer more avenues of approach. Calcutta and the Japanese

» [PC] The series was beloved for its big personalities, like mealy-mouthed Magnus Armstrong who turns from villain to hero across the two games.

> "Everything I did for FEAR was a reaction to things I had learned developing the AI for NOLF 2"
> **JEFF ORKIN**

» [PC] The sequel introduced larger non-linear settings like Calcutta, which were split into zones separated by loading screens.

» [PC] One mission sees you bullet-blitzing your way through a beautiful Bavarian hotel.

» [PC] The PS2 version of *No One Lives Forever* had three extra missions, but Craig – who didn't work on it – describes the port as a "horrible mess".

village particularly stand out in terms of open level design and evoking a sense of place. Then there's the Ohio mission, which trades off the pace to heighten the spy thriller fantasy as you creep around the house of a dead agent and snoop through his belongings (before you're ambushed by ninjas who chase you through Ohio while a tornado tears through the town).

But with Archer's more established status in the sequel as Undisputed Super Spy, Craig reflects that a little bit of the original's thematic strength was lost. "I regret that I didn't keep the theme [of Archer's gender-based struggle to get recognition] going in the sequel," he tells us. "It was partly overcompensation: too many long cutscenes in the first game made me a bit aggressive in trimming the sequel. Also, the game was about half the length due to everything costing twice as much with the new renderer/engine, so there wasn't as much room for narrative in general."

The team on the sequel had learned from the mistakes and built on the successes of the original. It was a bold, forward-thinking game whose non-linear level design and upgrade systems anticipated the formula that would propel Ubisoft's *Far Cry* series to stardom.

But the game still had its production problems, largely stemming from Monolith starting work on its first major IP. *Aliens Vs Predator 2* marked the start of Monolith's relationship with Warner Bros (which would lead to Monolith's acquisition in 2003), and resources were redirected from *NOLF 2* to the more prestigious project.

Craig Hubbard spent six months of *NOLF 2*'s preproduction instead working on *AvP 2*. "I checked in on *NOLF 2* periodically of course, but didn't have enough visibility to see where things had gone in the wrong direction." According to Craig, this indirectly led to development crunch much later on because "some levels needed to be completely rewired".

No One Lives Forever 2 was a success regardless, but its lack of priority was indicative of how the series never got the recognition it deserved, even within Monolith. From a certain point, there was always a bigger project to be working on at the studio – *AvP 2* in 2000, then later *FEAR*, which Jeff Orkin tells us was born out of funds originally designated for a *No One Lives Forever 3* prototype.

There's perhaps no bigger signifier of the series' desuetude than the fact that to this day it remains stuck in a licensing limbo where none of the game's potential publishers – Activision, 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros – care enough about the IP to push their claims on it. So instead of growing out into a great series of its own, *No One Lives Forever* served instead as a melting pot of great ideas that would really flourish in later titles. "Everything I did for *FEAR* was a reaction to things I had learned developing the AI for *No One Lives Forever 2*," Jeff recalls.

Despite his candid and critical thoughts on the series, Craig Hubbard says that he constantly runs into people who loved playing the games. "It makes me feel that maybe the flaws were sufficiently offset by the stuff that worked," he concludes. In the end, it would be up to fans and critics to give this series its dues. This may not have been enough to prolong the series, but at least earned it a place in the history books and online rankings as one of the best first-person shooters of all time. ✱

» [PC] The final mission of the sequel sees you fighting off super-soldiers on a scenic Greek island.

YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

A QUICK LOOK AT THE 2003 NOLF SPIN-OFF, CONTRACT JACK

Cate Archer's adventures are entrenched in many gamers' memories like a flashback-inducing LSD trip, but not as many people remember the spin-off *Contract JACK*. Taking place between the events of both *No One Lives Forever* games, the game casts you as HARM hitman John Jack, who single-handedly takes on a rival criminal organisation. *Contract JACK* stripped back many of the interesting systems, doing away with the stealth, character levelling and gadgetry in favour of a more linear FPS approach. Where *NOLF 2* felt like a precursor to sprawling open-world shooters, *Contract JACK* went down the corridor shooter path to its detriment.

The four-hour campaign may not have justified its full-game asking price back in the day, but fans of the series' lore may enjoy this brisk detour into the world of the series' baddies. Given that you can grab it for free through the *NOLF* Revival website (see fellow boxout), you could say there's no… HARM in checking it out? Ah, delicious puns.

Not that Craig Hubbard is desperate for you to play it. He says the game was forced to strip back on humour, the Sixties setting and the female protagonist because according to publisher Sierra those were the reasons the series didn't sell well. "Overall, it was just an expansion and our main focus was on ramping up for *FEAR*, so *Contract Jack* ended up not getting the attention it could have," he concludes. "It would have been preferable not to release it."

NetLink

» **PLATFORM:** Saturn » **RELEASED:** 1996
» **COST:** $199 (launch), £35+ (today, boxed) £25+ (today, unboxed)

This rather featureless slab of black plastic cost a bomb back in the mid-Nineties, but for Saturn owners it represented a gateway to worlds beyond the bedroom. The NetLink is a 28.8Kbps modem which was only released in North America and on a limited trial in Finland. One purpose of the device was to allow players to access the internet, using a dedicated browser disc developed by PlanetWeb and optionally the NetLink Keyboard and NetLink Mouse. Later versions of the browser even supported chatrooms via IRC.

The other major purpose of the modem was online multiplayer gaming, with players directly dialling one another rather than connecting to servers as is standard today. However, the first games to support this would not arrive until over nine months after the NetLink's launch, and very few were ever released. Just five North American games supported the modem, three of which were updated online ready versions of previous releases – *Daytona USA Championship Circuit Edition: NetLink Edition*, *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Saturn Bomberman*, *Sega Rally Championship Plus: NetLink Edition* and *Virtual On: NetLink Edition*. The NetLink was not commercially successful in North America, and plans for a full European rollout were cancelled in 1997. ✱

NetLink fact

■ It's actually still possible to play NetLink games, with today's users typically routing the modem through Voice Over IP systems in order to interface with modern broadband connections.

ESSENTIAL GAME

Sega Rally Championship Plus: NetLink Edition

As arguably the best Saturn game of all time, *Sega Rally* is already an essential purchase for any fan of arcade racers – but for NetLink owners, the updated version is the only way to go. As well as being slightly tweaked in the same way as the *Plus* version released in Japan, the NetLink options are there for a race against any other owner of the game. Saturn online gamers rate it as one of the best performing games to play today, ensuring that the high quality the game is known for will carry over to your multiplayer races too.

SUPPLIED BY
EVAN
AMOS

BATTLE AXE

IN THE KNOW

- **» PUBLISHER:** NUMSKULL GAMES
- **» DEVELOPER:** BITMAP BUREAU
- **» RELEASE:** OUT NOW
- **» PLATFORM:** PC, PS4, SWITCH
- **» GENRE:** ARCADE BRAWLER

» Veteran pixel artist Henk Nieborg, who can make 16-bit graphics just like it was yesterday.

"These days there's not many veteran pixel artists around, especially those that worked on the Mega Drive"
Mike Tucker

» [Switch] Scattered in each level are villagers to rescue, whose names are actually given by the game's Kickstarter backers.

The colourful and expressive pixels in Battle Axe are a love letter to the arcade classics of the Nineties. We talk to veteran pixel artist Henk Nieborg and Bitmap Bureau's Mike Tucker about how they brought this passion project to life frame by frame

WORDS BY ALAN WEN

It's fair to say that there's still a love and appreciation of pixel art in contemporary games, many which are rightly considered classics. However, most of these are from developers emulating the 8-bit and 16-bit games they grew up with. What we don't get as much are works from pixel artists from those eras still active and committed to that aesthetic.

Henk Nieborg is one such veteran, with a career spanning decades from the Amiga to the Mega Drive. After dabbling in 3D graphics, working on titles like *Harry Potter And The Chamber Of Secrets* and *Spyro: A Hero's Tail*, he was fed up with working in huge teams and went freelance, where his 2D talents could still contribute to mobile and handheld titles.

While those years led to dozens more credits, including *Contra 4*, *Shantae: Risky's Revenge* and *Shakedown Hawaii*, these were often as small contributions. Henk was pining for a project he could call his own, not done since *Lomax* on PlayStation in 1996. This was when *Battle Axe*, originally known as *Battle Bash*, began to take shape, as a 16-bit fantasy arcade brawler, harking back to *Golden Axe*, *Gauntlet* and Capcom's arcade titles from the Nineties. Fortunately, the prototypes got the attention of Bitmap Bureau's design director and programmer Mike Tucker, who had his own idea for a 16-bit game, Mega Drive arena shooter *Xeno Crisis*.

"I've known Henk from many, many years ago, but it was actually his mock-ups of *Battle Bash* that convinced us to work with him on *Xeno Crisis*," explains Mike. "These days there's not many veteran pixel artists around, especially those that worked on the Mega Drive so we were keen to find someone with that skill set, and still had that enthusiasm as well."

Xeno Crisis far exceeded its original Kickstarter funding goal, launching in 2019 to considerable success. "I did 90% of the art in that game, and we just worked really well as a team together," says Henk. "So I already had this idea for *Battle Bash*, it just felt natural to go back to work with these guys again, and so it turned out as our next project."

» [Switch] There were plans for a fourth character, but given the workload for just Henk, they kept it at three.

» [Switch] While co-op should in theory make things easier, that's nullified by each character having one life less.

Again, they turned to Kickstarter in early 2020, where the project exceeded its initial goal, allowing them to add a couple of additional modes on top of the core arcade mode. The development has been considerably quick, though that would not be including all the preliminary work and art Henk had done prior to this, not to mention that he was the sole artist.

For a tight arcade experience made up of four worlds – albeit with a couple also made up of interior sections that mean even more art – it sounds modest for a modern game, but clocks in about the same time as a typical Nineties arcade game. In any case, it was a massively challenging undertaking for one artist, which Mike estimates was about 5,000 frames of animation.

"The workload was a bit crazy but that was also part of the challenge I think, just to have my complete vision in the game and not having to outsource anything," says Henk, though in hindsight he also thinks maybe getting a couple other artists would have helped, at least maybe in future projects.

"For *Battle Axe*, it was all about Henk, it's his baby," adds Mike. "He's also got such a distinct style, it's hard to bring in someone to work with him, so we thought we'd just let him do his thing. It's nice when an artist has full control over the entire game's visuals."

» The game doesn't waste time with story, but you're essentially on a quest to defeat the evil sorceress Etheldred.

MEET THE CAST

A PIRATE, DARK ELF AND DRUID WALK INTO A BAR

ROONEY

This burly warrior is slower than the others but makes up for it with strength, starting with an extra health point. He'll bash foes with the cannon he slings on his shoulder or can smash through them with a shoulder charge. The cannon obviously also fires cannon balls, although the trajectory is a little higher since it's on his shoulder, which you'll need to take into account when lining up your shots.

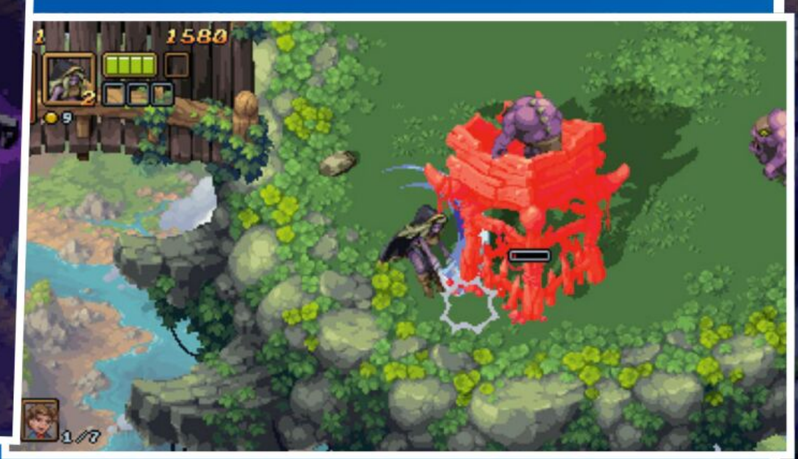
FAE

For players who like to be quick and nimble, Fae is your gal. Her dual blades nonetheless pack plenty of damage, especially when charging into enemies with her spin attack. She's not bad for ranged combat with her throwing dagger, but with one caveat. If the dagger fails to hit a target, you'll have to wait for a brief cooldown before you can throw another one.

IOLO

This old wizard is both a weak melee fighter and slow but compensates with his staff that blasts powerful magic at a faster rate than the others, which is great for those who want to play *Battle Axe* like a shoot-'em-up. He can also teleport a fair distance to get out of danger, although unlike a charge attack he'll only damage enemies he warps into rather than any in between.

» [Switch] Sometimes your path will be blocked by energy barriers, so it's a case of destroying a nearby generator.



» [Switch] Every character in *Battle Axe* plays differently, so you should find one to suit your playing style.

» [Switch] Bosses are fortunately not nightmarishly spongy affairs but a fair challenge with readable attack patterns.

You don't need to be that attentive to notice just how the colourful pixels of *Battle Axe* pop with just the 320x224 resolution of the Mega Drive, which still looks great when blown up to HD in widescreen. Both personally believe that is a perfect amount of pixels to work from rather than say a higher 640x480 resolution.

"We have to pixel everything from scratch, so it would be more than twice as much work," Henk explains. "To have that nice retro feeling we stuck to the 320x224 pixel size screen, and the thing is, because my pixel art is so detailed, it actually still looks good on a high resolution screen. Of course, it's kind of blocky, but that's the retro feel for me."

"I remember that weird era in the late-Nineties and early Noughties where 2D games were trying to move to higher resolution, and it was just too much really," adds Mike. "It's a lot more work, and really didn't add much to the visuals, so sticking to that classic resolution that the Neo Geo and Mega Drive used to pump out really helps define the feel and look of the game."

Indeed, Henk already had his work cut out for him as compared to the side-scrolling brawlers, *Battle Axe* features eight-way movement that is also reflected in the visuals. This meant drawing even more frames for the same character's action whereas for a horizontal 2D game an artist needed to animate just one direction and then flip it.

"If you just want to animate a main character, it takes about a month to do all the movements, because you have to create them from scratch from every direction, so you must animate at least in five directions, then flip the other three," explains Henk. "And that's also for every little enemy or boss in-game. But the main characters were the most work because you have to add all those movements."

» [Switch] Besides enemies, you'll need to watch out for environmental hazards. Charging through them works though!

» [Switch] Even though it's a predominantly fantasy setting, there's also a tinge of sci-fi in the art.

Of course, that attention to detail for expressive movement is part of Henk's style. When you see your heroes smashing up enemies with riotous kinetic energy, it's consciously harking back to the detailed sprite work we haven't really seen since Capcom and SNK were at their prime in the Nineties, with *Metal Slug* a particular inspiration.

Another aspect that separates Henk's pixel art from modern practitioners is that his work really is of a pure pixel mindset, which is to say that every pixel you see in *Battle Axe* is hand-drawn without any of the filters or post-processing effects indies 'cheat' with today. If something looks like there's light bouncing off it, it's not a lighting effect but actually hand-drawn. "I think people claim that you render your stuff out and just draw over the top of it," Mike jokes. "I never pre-render anything!" Henk laughs. "They look

MORE FROM HENK

HIGHLIGHTS FROM HENK NIEBORG'S ILLUSTRIOUS DECADES-LONG CAREER

Ghost Battle 1991

While Henk's first credited game was technically 1989's Amiga puzzler *Charly*, it's *Ghost Battle* that really showcased his pixel skills with character design, even if the game itself was mostly a clone of *Ghosts 'N Goblins* and *Shadow Of The Beast*. This was nonetheless the start of Henk's career with German publisher Thalion Software.

Lionheart (1993)

One of the Amiga's most technically accomplished titles, much praise was given to the moveset of feline warrior Valdyn that felt akin to a fighting game, no doubt also thanks to Henk's detailed and expressive animations. Sadly it was also among the last of Thalion's games as the company closed the following year.

Flink (1994)

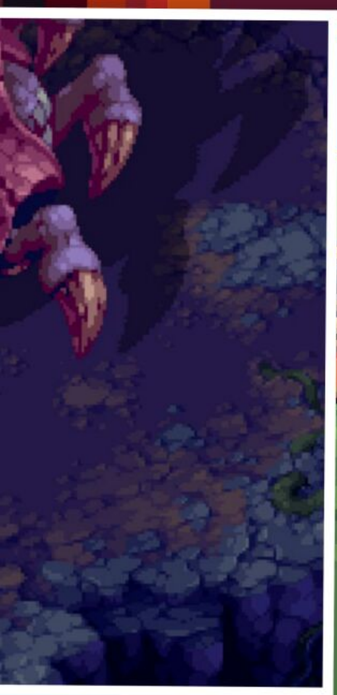
After Thalion, Henk moved to Psygnosis where he designed the graphics for *The Misadventures Of Flink* (to give its full title). While it includes CD-ROM-based versions allowing for a higher-quality soundtrack, Henk's excellent pixel work is the same on whichever format you play this otherwise bog-standard 2D platformer.

Lomax (1996)

Most developers may have taken the leap to 3D graphics with the arrival of PlayStation, but Henk stuck to what he was best at in this action-platforming spin-off of *Lemmings*. Instead of shepherding the creatures to safety, you took control of lemming knight Lomax as he's forced to fight his brainwashed and transformed brethren.

Xeno Crisis (2019)

After decades of freelancing, Henk returned to his pixel-art talents in full in the first collaboration with Bitmap Bureau, a hardcore *Smash TV*-meets-*Aliens* sci-fi arena shooter where you face aliens, robots and even Cthulhu. The game ran on Mega Drive hardware, though it's also been ported to modern platforms.



"It's very old school and to be honest, we don't really make games for casual players"
MIKE TUCKER

» [Switch] Each frame of animation looks so expressive but just screenshots really don't do them justice.

like perfect rotations but I just love to do sprite rotations. I don't know, I render it in my head and put it on screen, and that's a fact."

Battle Axe doesn't just faithfully look the part of a Nineties arcade game, it sounds it too. There's the wonderfully booming voice-over announcing the name of each level, when you pick up an item or warn that your character's close to death's door. But the even bigger impression is a retro soundtrack from none other than legendary composer Manami Matsumae, whose themes for *Mega Man*, *Dynasty Wars*, *Mercs* and *Final Fight* meant she could provide an authentic Capcom System-1 arcade sound that the team was after.

While this isn't Manami Matsumae's first collaboration with a Western developer, having contributed a few tracks to *Shovel Knight*, the opportunity came through one of Mike's past connections. "Going back a few years, I met a guy called Alex Aniel, who was a friend of an artist that we used to work with," he explains. "Alex runs a record label called Brain Wave and is actually Manami Matsumae's agent and translator. He asked at some point if we might like to work with one of his artists, so it's always been in the back of my mind. When *Battle Axe* came along, it just seemed like a great fit to get Matsumae-san working on the project, as she's also worked on games like *Magic Sword*, which has similar medieval themes and hack-and-slash gameplay."

Of course, what's also true to form is *Battle Axe*'s hardcore difficulty, which is incidentally 'Hard' by default, although you don't get much of a pass with 'Easy'. What's most punishing is that you have just three lives to get through the game and once they're gone it's game over. Although there are ways to upgrade your max health or a chance to pick up items to restore health, a chance to earn extra lives or an option to add more credits isn't part of the package.

Just as with Bitmap Bureau's *Xeno Crisis*, that difficulty is intentional, although at least not as brutal as say *Ghosts 'N Goblins*. "It's very old school and to be honest, we don't really make games for casual players," says Mike unapologetically. "We want to make games that hark back to that era, but they're not unfair like they were in the Eighties and Nineties. Sometimes when you play *Final Fight*, the bosses had so many invincibility frames it just feels like you're having your credits stolen off you. Our games are tough but fair, so if you put in the hours you will be rewarded."

Considering a full run can be beaten in under 30 minutes once you've mastered it, that's not too demanding overall as you learn the level layout and get more skilful with repeated plays. For those who manage to defeat the evil sorceress Etheldred at the end, further incentive to replay also comes from the trickier challenge of getting a higher score to not getting hit at all if you're trying to finish a level with an A or S grade. The chain combo is an especially compelling mechanic borrowed from shoot-'em-ups where players try to maintain a combo by hitting objects or enemies before the combo gauge breaks and resets.

» [Switch] The mysterious merchant visits in between levels offering items and upgrades – though without text, you'll have to infer what some do.

"The maps actually take that into account so you can keep your combo going," says Mike. "So even if you hit a fence, that counts towards your combos so I've tactically placed barrels or fences, so that you can go from killing one enemy, you might then throw a knife at a barrel over there, which counts as a hit, and that'll actually progress on to the next enemy to keep your chain going. It's really fun and satisfying to try and maintain your combo for the whole level!"

In any case, *Battle Axe* is a true old-school arcade experience that allows Henk's pure pixel perfect vision for the 16-bit classics to shine like never before. It's a cut above modern indies that lean either on simpler 8-bit styles or compensate with filters, or worse, mixed resolutions, which goes against the pure old-school flavour Bitmap Bureau is aiming for. There's an eye for detail and dedication to Henk's work you don't really see anymore, though we can only hope other artists will be inspired to take up that challenge and create some more games that we'd love to feature in the magazine. ✱

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

OLD!
retro GAMER
THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO CLASSIC GAMES
SIGN UP!
THE MAKING OF DRIVER
BROTHERS
— a Tale of Two Sons
IN THIS ISSUE OF RETRO GAMER
SINCLAIR ZX80
THE MACHINE THAT KICK-STARTED THE SUCCESS OF SIR CLIVE SINCLAIR
WARIO
A LOOK BACK AT THE EXPLOITS OF MARIO'S EVIL NEMESIS
JOHN GIBSON
WE SPEAK TO THE DEVELOPER BEHIND IMAGINE'S INFAMOUS FIRMOREMATH
MYSTICAL NINJA
WHY KONAMI'S SPIN-OFF IS ONE OF THE FUNNIEST GAMES AROUND

Info

- **System:** Xbox 360, Various
- **Year:** 2013
- **Publisher:** 505 Games
- **Developer:** Starbreeze Studios
- **Key People:** Josef Fares, Gustaf Grefberg, Carl Cranberg

Go Deeper

- *Brothers* sold over 800,000 copies after just 18 months. No wonder 505 Games snapped it up.
- On 12 March 2014, *Brothers* won a BAFTA for Game Innovation and was also nominated in the Family and Best Story categories.

» [Switch] Puzzles are rarely taxing, but can often put the brothers in danger. Don't fall off!

This Nordic-themed adventure may be short, but it's most definitely sweet and allows your console or PC to become a portal into a magical world filled with trolls and puzzles as you marvel at the bravery and determination of two indomitable brothers

Words by Darran Jones

BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

THE BACKGROUND

We first played *Brothers* when it made its console debut on Microsoft's Xbox 360 in 2013, but a recent physical Switch release courtesy of Super Rare Games has allowed us to once again revisit this marvellous little game. The origins of *Brothers* can be traced all the way back to 2011 when its developer Starbreeze Studios revealed it was working on a collaboration with the acclaimed film director Josef Fares. Initially known as *P13*, *Brothers* was created using the Unreal Engine 3 and was promising to be quite different from the studio's other games, which were typically gritty affairs like *The Darkness* and *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*.

"I see *Brothers* as a fairy tale, as a book where something new happens all the time," Josef revealed to IGN in a 2012 interview.

It's a strong assessment of the game and Josef's own personal interest in gaming clearly fed into his overall vision, which has a strong focus on story, but never loses sight of the fact that it's a tactile experience to be enjoyed by the player.

Starbreeze eventually sold *Brothers* to 505 Games in 2015 for $500,000 and since then it has been released on all contemporary systems, allowing new gamers to discover the delightful tale of Naiee and his older brother Naia.

THE GAME

Brothers begins with tragedy as Naiee recalls his inability to save his mother from drowning due to his own fears of a watery death. Naiee's father is ill and when the village's doctor reveals that water from the Tree Of Life is the only way to save him, the youngster sets off on a magical journey alongside his brother Naia. It's a simple introduction but a powerful one and as the adventure unfolds themes like loss and triumphing over adversity continually crop up as the brothers wander through some sensational-looking locations, including a battleground filled with

» [Switch] Some of *Brothers*' best moments happen when Naiee and Naia are just being brothers.

» [Switch] As with *Ico*, you can take a break every now and then and just marvel at the view.

» [Switch] There's no understandable dialogue but strong direction and gestures make the story easy to comprehend.

Things of note

SOUNDS FAMILIAR

Josef Fares reveals in *Brothers*' commentary that the spoken language is based on Lebanese Arabic.

SOOTHING SCORE

As well as *Brothers*, Gustaf Grefberg has scored several other games for Starbreeze, including *Enclave* and *The Darkness*.

SWITCHED ON

The Switch version, recently released physically by Super Rare Games, is rather unique as two players can each control a brother.

ENHANCED

All the 505 console editions of the game include a neat director's commentary, the soundtrack and a glorious art gallery.

GET TOUCHY

Even if you don't have access to a console or PC, it's still possible to enjoy *Brothers* as versions are available on both Android and iOS systems.

fallen giants and quaint Nordic villages that look like they could have sprung from the pages of a Brothers Grimm book.

Both brothers are controlled via analogue sticks and each have their own strengths. Naia, being stronger, can boost his brother to access otherwise inaccessible areas and can use his strength to pull certain levers, while the smaller and nimbler Naiee can squeeze between bars. The brothers' greatest strength comes from working together however and you'll continually have to use them to complete many of the simple puzzles that the game throws at you, whether it's working out how to dislodge a giant's arm from a path they want to access, distracting an angry dog so they can take it in turns to reach safety, or working out how to reach a flying contraption so they can continue the next step of their journey.

What's great about *Brothers* is despite the seriousness of the quest they find themselves on, the two brothers still find time to have fun, whether it's lobbing balls down wells, laughing at each other as Naia attempts to play a harp or simply sitting down to take a breather and admiring the gorgeous landscapes they'll soon have to traverse. It grounds the game beautifully and constantly reminds you of the bond the brothers share as well as the invisible bonds that tie you to them.

Brothers even manages to feature some boss fights, but as each brother is unarmed you'll need to use the environments and your wits in order to best the fantastical creatures that do show up to occasionally challenge you.

Brothers only takes a few hours to complete, but the time absolutely flies by because you're so engrossed in the lived-in world that the team has created. It's a magical place filled with fearsome trolls, feats of magic and dangerous spiders, but there are always moments of beauty that punch through the bleakness and as the siblings' adventure unfolds Naiee finally finds the strength to overcome his fears and make peace with the loss of his mother.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

Anyone can relate to *Brothers*' themes of loss and regret and the game has lost none of its power to convey those emotions in the last eight years. While it's not the most spectacular looking of games, its hazy aesthetics, haunting score and cinematic structure nevertheless gives Starbreeze's game a distinctive look and feel that makes it feel grander than its small budget suggests. And then of course there are the two brothers that drive your journey, two siblings who will do everything they can to help their dying father and are never afraid to come to each other's aid, no matter how dangerous the peril they find themselves in is.

The brevity of the game also benefits it as it means there's no real excuse to not give it a try. It may be short, but you'll be thinking about the tale of Naiee and Naia long after their quest is over. ✱

VIOLET BERLIN

Violet Berlin shot to fame as the presenter of ITV's Bad Influence! – but the convoluted story of how she got the job involves everything from watermelon ninja turtles to a last-ditch dash around Eastern Europe in a Ford Cortina

Words by Lewis Packwood

After presenting the youth-focused satellite TV show *Cool Cube* and the kid-focused animal programme *WildBunch*, Violet Berlin went on to host the CITV videogame show *Bad Influence!* alongside children's television stalwart Andy Crane. The programme ran for four series, and concurrently Violet wrote games columns for the *Observer Magazine* and *Digitiser*, as well as setting up her own TV company to make programmes for The Children's Channel. She later hosted science show *The Big Bang* and *Gamepad*, as well as writing and presenting the technology series *SoundByte* for the BBC World Service. Shortly after the birth of her children in the Noughties, she switched focus to become a script writer and narrative designer for interactive and immersive experiences.

So how did you get into games TV after leaving university?
I studied English language and Anglo Saxon and Old Norse at university – because I was obsessed with Tolkien and that's what he had taught. I wanted to write stories, and I'd grown up without a television, so I was very naive about the TV industry – and in fact about life in general.

Oh you didn't have a TV, that's interesting! Did that make you want to be on TV all the more?
No, not at all! I wanted to write children's stories. And I thought if I want to write for children, the thing to do is to get a job with my audience and understand what they love while I'm doing it. So my grand, ambitious, foolhardy plan was to get a job in children's television while writing my books.

Anyway, by absolute chance I managed to find a TV company that was looking for a runner and researcher, so I applied. And I think that he really liked all my ideas because I was so 'out there' – because I hadn't had a television, I don't think I really had any clichéd ideas, as I didn't really know what was expected. I got a job researching, writing and running on *WAC '90* with Michaela Strachan and Tommy Boyd, the successor to *Wide Awake Club*.

We used to love that show!
Yeah, it was really fun making it. One of my jobs was to get the pop stars out on set on time, and it was really stressful because they would have big boots with loads of laces, and you'd say, 'OK, it's ten seconds to go,' and they'd say, 'I'll just put my boots on,' and you'd be like, 'Oooooh, I'm going to get into trouble, they're going to miss their cue!' Anyway, I quickly progressed from that to become the sole writer and researcher on *Wacaday*. I had to get all the kids in, write the questions for Mallet's Mallet, write the little drama inserts… oh, and I had to make the gunge.

What did you make it from?
You can't give away my hard-earned secret! No one gives you the gunge recipe, you just have to make your own up. Anyway, I was doing that for a few months until one day they were auditioning for a new show called *Cool Cube*, a live show for kids on BSB on Saturdays and Sundays. They were having the auditions on the roof of the *TV-am* building in Camden, and somebody didn't turn up, so the head of the TV company came in – a fairy tale moment in a way – and said, 'Oh, you're looking chipper today, why don't you do an audition?' So I immediately spent the next hour on the toilet, and after that I managed to get up onto the roof. And I got the job!

So then I had to move to Manchester. The show was made at Granada Studios, and they had something called Granada Studio Tours…

Is that the one with the *Coronation Street* set?
Yes! Basically, they built a glass-walled studio, and we were part of the tour. And *Stars In Their Eyes* was going on in the studio next door at the time – it was the centre of the entertainment universe! Although we weren't the centre of the entertainment universe, we were on a shoestring live TV show going out on satellite to a grand total of one person. But we could use any part of the tour as our set, and we would go up to people on the tour and voxpop them and find our quiz contestants from the crowds. It was really fun. And I got to be a live presenter with an earpiece and everything. Talk about trial by fire.

Although of course no one was watching, so it was kind of like playtime. But the thing was that the other presenters would just come up at the weekend and present, whereas I was still researching and ▶

“My grand, ambitious, foolhardy plan was to get a job in children’s television while writing my books”
Violet Berlin

SELECTED TIMELINE

TV SHOWS

- **WAC '90** [1990] TV-AM
- **WACADAY** [1990] TV-AM
- **COOL CUBE** [1990–1991] BSB
- **WILDBUNCH** [1991] BBC1
- **BAD INFLUENCE!** [1992–1996] CITV
- **HEAD TO HEAD** [1993] THE CHILDREN'S CHANNEL
- **HEAD TO HEAD IN 3D** [1993] THE CHILDREN'S CHANNEL
- **A-Z OF GAMES** [1994] THE CHILDREN'S CHANNEL
- **CHEATFLASH** [1994] THE CHILDREN'S CHANNEL
- **BAD LEVEL 10** [1995] THE CHILDREN'S CHANNEL
- **BITS & BYTES** [1995] GMTV
- **SATURDAY DISNEY** [1995] ITV
- **OUCH!** [1996] THE CHILDREN'S CHANNEL
- **THE GREAT COMPUTER CHALLENGE** [1997] ITV
- **THE BIG BANG** [1998–2001] ITV
- **ONE SMALL STEP** [1999] CHANNEL 4
- **GAMESPOT** TV [2000] BRAVO
- **CRAZY HOW BAD ATTACK** [2001] ITV
- **TECH** [2001] NETWORK OF THE WORLD
- **GAMEPAD** [2001–2004] BRAVO

BAD influence!
FIVE GREAT COMPOS
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Andy and Violet battle their way through the latest games
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WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT
Complete buyer's guide to games, computers, joysticks
Nam Rood blows away the secrets behind the top games

» Europress published a *Bad Influence!* magazine in 1992, but it was short-lived, only lasting for two issues.

» Violet Berlin was immortalised as a driver in *Micro Machines 2* in 1994.

» Violet set up her own TV company to make the videogame show *Head To Head* for The Children's Channel.

» Frank Sidebottom was a regular guest on *Cool Cube*, and the show also featured early performances by Take That.

» Zoe Ball was Violet's lab assistant for the science slots on the BSB satellite show *Cool Cube*, marking her first TV appearance.

» Here's Violet aged 22 in Timmy Mallet's back garden. Her second job in TV was as a writer and researcher on Mallet's show *Wacaday*.

writing as well as presenting, so basically they really got their money's worth out of me.

Were you working seven days a week?
Pretty much. I tended to get given things like science experiments, because I was the one who had to research them and find all the props. So rather than me telling another presenter, 'This is what you do to make an egg go into a bottle,' it was on me to do it myself. I did the science slots, I wrote and hosted the quiz, and I did some of the animal items, pieces that tended to need a bit of research.

So is that how you ended up finding yourself covering videogames?
Yeah, because back then people thought that videogames were like an alien thing. If you'd stuck any of the other presenters in front of a videogame, or even me at the start, we would have just been standing there regarding it like a foreign language. John Barratt on production said, 'I've got these Nintendo guys coming over, we should talk to them,' so I ended up taking a NES home and playing *Castlevania* – and getting hooked. And it wasn't just Nintendo, we talked to folks from Atari ST, Commodore 64, Master System, all sorts, and I took command of the videogame strand. And as far as I know, *Cool Cube* was the first regular coverage of videogames on UK TV. In some ways that's my real claim to fame, that was a real first.

I did the 'make and dos' as well. And one night I was so tired, and I hadn't got any make and dos for the show. But one of our cartoons was *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles*, so I bought a melon on the way in – honestly, this is so pathetic – and I made a turtle out of a sock and half a melon. And everyone was like, 'Isn't that going to rot?' and I hadn't even got an answer for that, I was so wrung out, I had nothing. And the only time I've ever got recognised or complimented for being on that show was at a gay nightclub in Manchester, when two guys came up to me and said, 'We watch you every Saturday morning, we love your bits. We laugh and laugh and laugh, everything always goes wrong!' Bless them.

So how long were you doing that for?
I did that for a year. And you know that show broke a lot of people, we had Mrs Merton, Frank Sidebottom, Take That, all the *Neighbours* stars. Zoe Ball was the runner, and I got her on TV in her first TV appearance – she was my lab assistant in my science slot. It was all happening, but secretly, only watched by two people. Those two people in that nightclub in Manchester.

And did you get approached for *Bad Influence!* after that?
No, I heard that there was BBC television show that they were auditioning for in Bristol at the natural history unit, who at the time were making *The Really Wild Show*, and they decided to make a junior version called *WildBunch*. So I went down there and auditioned – I remember I had to hold a rat and talk about it in my own words – and I got the job and moved back to London. And that is how I got to be a guest with Andi Peters in The Broom Cupboard.

I felt like, 'Oh my goodness, I've completely made it, I'm on BBC One, I'm in The Broom Cupboard!' But after that one series – and you know, it just takes a few weeks to do a series – there was no work. It wasn't like a weekly job, I had absolutely nothing. I started looking at temping again. And I was in pantomime! I just did it out of desperation, I did it for the money. But then I worked out that I probably would have got paid more for working in a pub, because of the long hours.

I began to think, 'That was it, that was my TV career.' You sort of think that all you need to do is get in The Broom Cupboard and then that's it, you've made it. But in something as competitive as that, you have to make it every single day.

At that point were you still thinking about being a children's writer?

» Violet presented *Bad Influence!* alongside children's TV veteran Andy Crane, although Violet was far more of a games expert than Andy.

> "Nobody else was interested in picking up on the videogame thing when I left Cool Cube"
> Violet Berlin

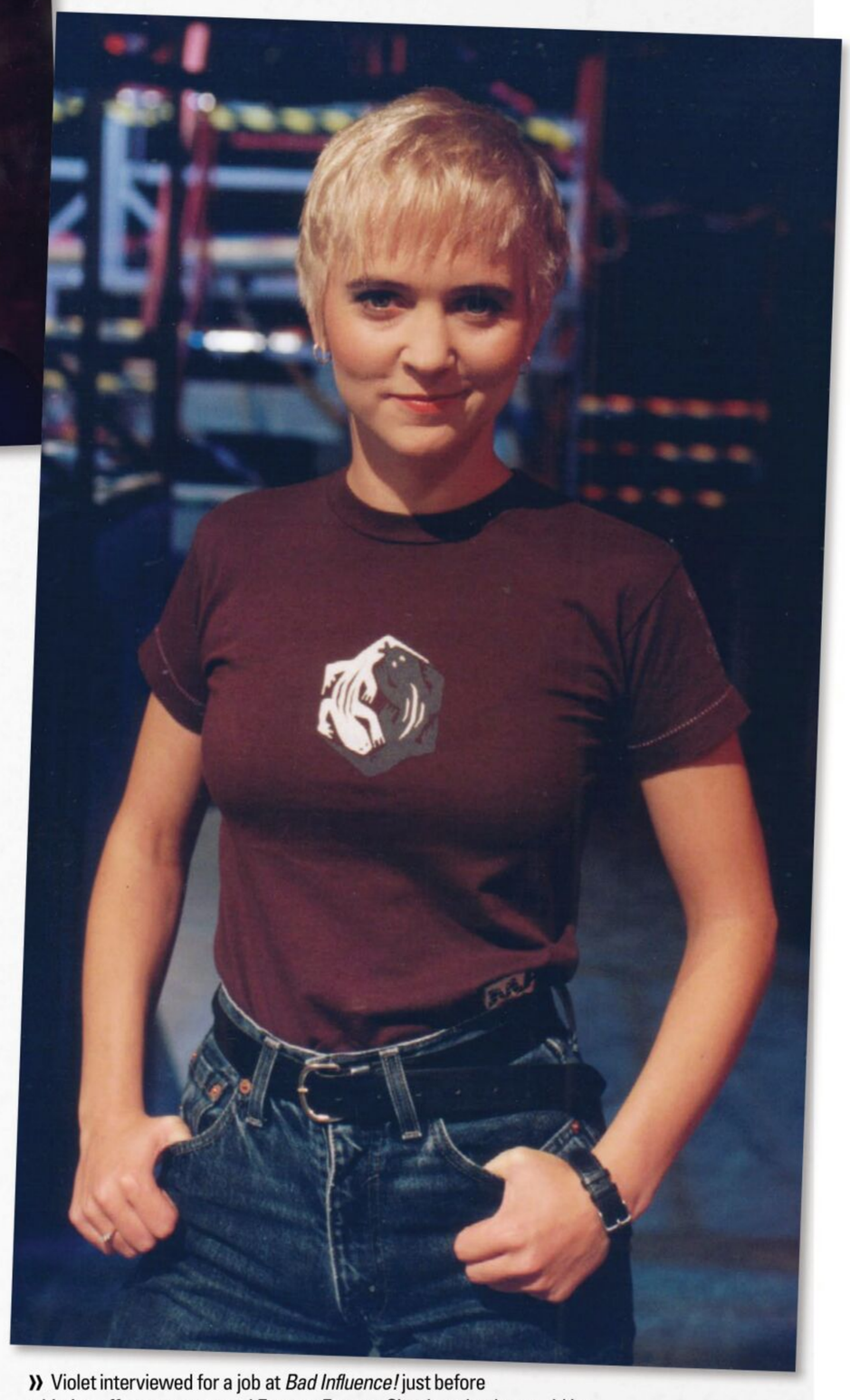
Yes, I was! But I was more concerned about getting money. At the same time, because nobody else was interested in picking up on the videogame thing when I left *Cool Cube*, I had kept the NES. I was hooked on *Mario* and *Mega Man*, so basically I hibernated and played videogames a lot.

Was it just the NES you were playing at the time?
Yeah, because that was the one that I had and I couldn't afford to buy any new games, so I just played the same old games over and over again. But then my boyfriend Henry got made redundant and he got some money. So he bought a computer and we came up with a grand plan: we were going to write our novels and move back to Manchester, because we liked it there and it was cheaper than London. And then we spent an entire year not really writing our novels, but playing a heck of a lot of videogames. We mostly played *Zelda*. It was the best time ever.

Anyway, we got to the end of the year of living frugally and barely moving, and we were like, 'OK, we're gonna have to get proper jobs and put on some sensible shoes.' But we decided to have one last hurrah: we were going to drive an old car around Eastern Europe. Then the week before we did that, an old friend of mine called Mike Brosnan, who presented a show called *Top Banana*, got in touch with me. Everyone knew that I liked computers and videogames, and Mike said, 'I've heard that there's this new videogame show at Yorkshire TV, why don't you apply for it?'

So I wrote to Yorkshire TV and said, 'I really love videogames, and I'd really love to help out on the show.' Then they got straight back and said, 'We want to see you,' and I said, 'I'm about to go to Eastern Europe, but I'll just squeeze in seeing you before I go.' Literally we had the old Ford Cortina loaded up with all our stuff for six weeks around Europe, and me and my boyfriend drove from Manchester to Leeds, then he parked outside while I went in for the interview. I learnt that the show was going to be called *Bad Influence!*, and there was this idea for something called a Data Blast – and I have to admit that I was just thinking, 'I'm gonna get loads of free games if I work on this show!' That was the order of priority in my brain.

Then off we went around Eastern Europe, had a big adventure and spent the last of our money. We got back to Manchester ready to put on our sensible shoes, and at the time I thought I might get a job as a typist in a bank. Then I got this phone call from Yorkshire TV, and they said, 'We want you to come and work on the show' – but they didn't say in what role. I thought I'd ▶



» Violet interviewed for a job at *Bad Influence!* just before whizzing off on a tour around Eastern Europe. She thought she would be a researcher, and didn't realise she'd be the presenter until she arrived.

FIVE TO PLAY

A few projects Violet has been involved with

CHEATFLASH

■ Violet's TV company made *CheatFlash* for The Children's Channel, which had many cartoons and a fair amount of original programming. "That was the most fun!" she says. "I was dressed up as an American-style news anchor, then we'd do a cheat or a fact or something, and it would always end in disaster. And it was really badly acted, but it was a right laugh."

BAD LEVEL 10

■ *Bad Level 10* was a spin-off of *Bad Influence!* on The Children's Channel that was made by Yorkshire TV. Violet presented the show alongside Steve Keen, who was originally a researcher on *Bad Influence!*. "It was presented in an arcade in Leeds," recalls Violet, "and it was super fun. And actually, Mr Biffo [Paul Rose] from *Digitiser* appeared on it."

SOUNDBYTE

■ "Nowadays they've got a show called *Click*, but before that there was a show that I wrote, presented and produced on the BBC World Service that was called *SoundByte*," says Violet. She made the show for around three years, and you can listen to her episodes via the BBC World Service archive. And before you ask, yes, Mr Biffo did make an appearance (www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p035mkqs).

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

■ "I did this thing for the British Museum which was a collaboration with Google, where you use your phone to call up different pilgrims and hear their stories while they appear around you," says Violet. "It was about allowing people to appreciate carvings from a Buddhist shrine in a way other than reading a bit of blurb about them."

INSTALLATIONS

■ "The most ambitious game I think I've done was in a science centre in Saudi Arabia," says Violet. "It was an entire room filled with 34 screens, and it was a multiplayer game. I prefer to use a game mechanic as a metaphor for a system or to communicate the message – I would never create a game that was just 'you tap the screen and then you learn something'. Ugh!"

King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, KSA ©Phil Hartley Associates.

probably be a researcher or something. So I went up there, and we had this big production team lunch, and everyone was toasting the new show…

And you were thinking, 'What am I going to be doing?'
Yeah, and they were like, 'Welcome Andy and Violet, our new presenters!' And that was when I learnt, just by chance almost, that I was going to be the presenter of the show. And I wasn't even sure I'd heard right, so I didn't even question it. I felt I'd be embarrassed if I said, 'Am I gonna be the presenter?' and they would then say, 'Oh, don't be ridiculous, you misheard completely.' But it was confirmed, and I was a bit surprised that they didn't want me to research for the show, too – finally I was one of those presenters who just rock up. Then the following week, I got a phone call from the *Observer* newspaper saying, 'We've got this magazine that comes out on Sundays, will you be our game reviewer?'

How did that happen?
Well I heard from my agent that they'd rung up Dominik Diamond and asked him to do it, and he was too busy. I don't know whether that's true or not. But they asked me to write it, and I hadn't written a newspaper column before – I hadn't even read a newspaper if I'm absolutely honest!
We didn't have newspapers growing up in my house. It makes it sound like I lived in Outer Mongolia, but I didn't, I lived in Acton in West London.

> "I spend more time writing games and other interactive things these days than playing them"
> Violet Berlin

And did you get your wish? Did you get sent loads of games?
Every day! Stuff would turn up every day. I had a pile of Mega Drive games that literally reached the ceiling. I played games all the time, it was fun. I was there with my boyfriend and it was almost like an extension of our mad year off. We trained for this, you know!

So how much input did you have on *Bad Influence!*? Was it a case of just turning up for filming?
I did have influence on the show because I was so into my games. For the first few series, I would almost be like a consultant figure on the show, as well as presenting it. Not formally, but I was going off to every game launch and knew what was going on. I had features on the radio, I started writing my own syndicated games column in all the regional newspapers, I started writing for *Digitiser*, and I wrote occasionally for the trade press, so I was pretty hardcore. So by the fourth series, they gave me the role of doing all the external reports.

And the Virtual Violet bit, too?
Yeah, I wrote that. They gave me carte blanche pretty much, they'd just say, 'What are you going to do?' and I wrote the script. That was all from me, so I was very proud of that. And also in that period, I started my own TV company.

Did that happen when you were still presenting *Bad Influence!*?
Yes. *Bad Influence!* was September to January or something, but it's not a full-time job, you can't live off it. So I decided that I wanted to make my own shows. I've had a few really big TV shows that have come so close to being made. You can spend two years of your life working on something and then the commissioner changes and it's all gone.
But I did get a show on the Children's Channel. I sold a show to them called *Head To Head*. It was a really simple five-minute daily show where two children sat across a giant brain and played a game, and I was commentating from inside the game. We did loads of series, even one in 3D. It was really fun, and it gave loads of kids a chance to come on TV and have a quick play of their best game. And that was where I met Guru Larry [Larry Bundy Jr].
I also started getting asked to do lots of other stuff that wasn't games related, stuff like guides to early computers and the internet. But ironically, *Bad Influence!* came to an end when the PlayStation and all the next-generation systems came along.

Just when gaming was getting really, really good!
Yeah, it was really bonkers. So I'd done a lot of videogame stuff for four years, and I kept doing it for a bit, but I had grown really interested in the early internet and wider technology, and science as well. I was *Woman's Hour*'s internet correspondent, and then I got a job presenting a show for the BBC World Service about technology. My new thing was science and technology, and I got really into space – so basically I got a new obsession, and the sheen of videogames came off a little bit.

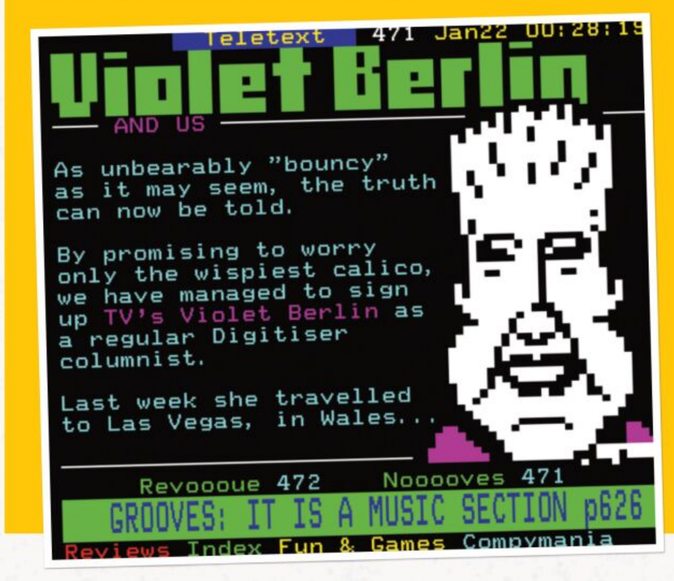
How did you end up doing GameSpot TV?
Bravo got in touch and said, 'We've got this American show and we're localising it, and we need a presenter.' And then the following year, Bravo made their own videogame show called *Gamepad*, and they asked me to come back and present it. By

STANNING MR BIFFO

Violet Berlin ended up with a regular column on Teletext's *Digitiser* from 1994. "I was a massive fan of *Digitiser*," she says, "and read it every day. Out of all the gaming journalists, I wanted to meet them most of all. So I went to a trade show, and I was talking to Nintendo's PR and said, 'I've always wanted to meet the guys from *Digitiser*, are you seeing them at this trade show?' And they said, 'Yep, we're seeing Paul and Tim.'

"So I booked my meeting slot before Paul and Tim's, and then I said, 'Oh, I just want to see what they look like, can I hide behind this pillar? And then maybe you can introduce me?' I was absolutely what you would now call stanning. And then they turned up, and they were lovely, quite self-effacing guys, and I couldn't help myself – I might even have jumped out from behind the pillar saying, 'Hello! I love you, *Digitiser*'s the best thing!' And they were really taken aback, but we became really good friends, and then from that came my column.

"I did a weekend column for them for about three years, and I had totally ran out of opinions by the end. And that was when they got in other people, so then I only did it once a month. They got in Stuart Campbell once a month and some guy from *Loaded* magazine, because it was the Nineties."


Teletext 471 Jan22 00:28:19
Violet Berlin
AND US
As unbearably "bouncy" as it may seem, the truth can now be told.
By promising to worry only the wispiest calico, we have managed to sign up TV's Violet Berlin as a regular Digitiser columnist.
Last week she travelled to Las Vegas, in Wales...
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Nooooves 471
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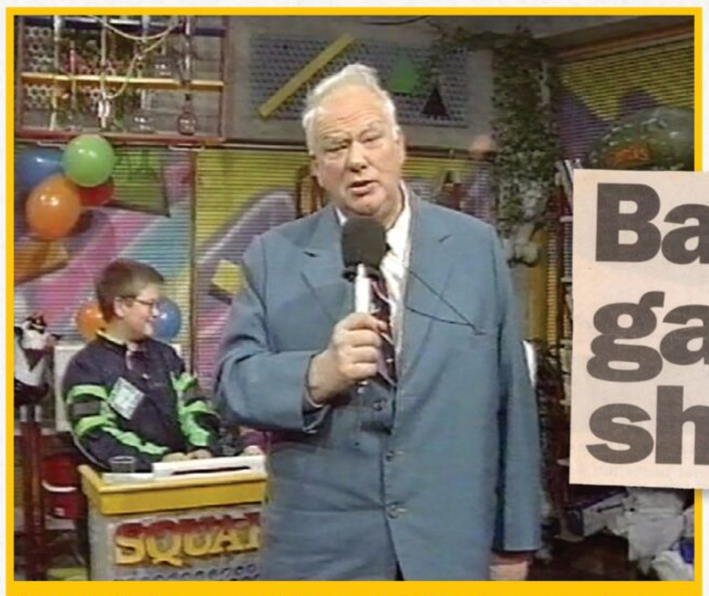
» Guru Larry (aka Larry Bundy Jr) appeared on Violet's show *Head To Head* around 1993, and he would go on to be a hugely popular YouTuber. Violet met up with him again around three years ago.

» One series of *Head To Head* was made in 3D, and kids were shown how to make 3D glasses at home.



» Patrick Moore was on *Cool Cube* long before he was the *GamesMaster*. Here he is introducing the Square Dare quiz that Violet wrote and presented.

Battle of the game shows

STAND by video games fans for a brand new TV show – and a small-screen battle.

Hot on the heels of Channel 4's phenomenally successful *Gamesmaster* (Channel 4, Tuesday, 6.30pm), ITV is to launch its own rival programme.

Motormouth presenter Andy Crane will front the 25-minute show, produced by Yorkshire Television, and it hits the screen in October for a 13-week run.

"We want to get more of a *Tomorrow's World* feel about gameplaying than *Gamesmaster*," says producer Patrick Titley. We will have up-to-the-minute games reviews in which the audience have their say.

"*Gamesmaster* treats computer and video games as a spectator sport which I think has a limited appeal.

"We actually started planning the show long before *Gamesmaster*.

"But ITV's commissioning procedure means things take a long time to get off the ground."

The show will go out every Thursday at 4.45pm and has the working title of *Overload*.

Andy Crane, 27, sounds the right man for the job. He recently had to fill in on *Motormouth* when snooker ace Jimmy White failed to show up to promote his Whirlwind Snooker video game.

★ GAMESMASTER star Dominik Diamond will present the computer and video games 'Oscar' ceremony on April 12 at London's Limelight Club.

Software experts from all over the world have contributed to the event which marks the opening of the European Computer Trade Show. A variety of awards will be offered including Best Graphics, Best Action Game and Best Sim.

BOLD FRONT: Andy Crane

TOP TEN GAMES

THESE are the Top Ten selling games nationwide for all consoles:

1 (–) Sonic The Hedgehog (Master).
2 (–) Winter Challenge (Mega).
3 (5) Super Mario Bros 3 (NES).
4 (1) Robocod (Mega Drive)
5 (2) Donald Duck (Master).
6 (–) Super Mario Land (Game Boy).
7 (–) Donald Duck (Game Gear).
8 (–) Mickey Mouse (Master).
9 (9) The Simpsons (NES).
10 (3) Road Rash (Mega)

*Chart courtesy of Columbus Distribution.

» Newspapers billed *Bad Influence!* as the big rival to *GamesMaster* when it launched in 1992, although the former was positioned as a '*Tomorrow's World* for videogames' rather than a competitive show.

» Since 2004, Violet has been a script writer and narrative designer for interactive experiences at various museums and other public spaces.

» Violet first met Gareth Jones (aka Gaz Top) on *Cool Cube*, but the pair wouldn't become a couple until many, many years later. They now have two sons.

that point I had got together with Gareth [Jones, aka Gaz Top], and we were presenting *The Big Bang* together. We kept doing the show after our first son, but when I was pregnant with our second son just slightly over one year later, I lost my job at *The Big Bang* because the birth was going to clash with filming, and they weren't going to move the filming dates. Gareth didn't want to be away filming in Leeds while I was having a baby, so he said, 'I'm not gonna do it either.' So it ended up with neither of us having a main job when we were about to have a second baby, and we were a bit desperate.

So I got in touch with Bravo and said, 'Are you going to make another series of *Gamepad*?' They said they were thinking of doing it, but they didn't want to do it in-house, they were looking for a TV company to make it. And I said, 'Well my TV company can make it for you.'

So you'd kept the TV company going?

No, I hadn't! We'd disbanded the TV company. So I hadn't got a TV company at all, I just said I had. And they went, 'Oh, how much would that cost?' And I said, 'Well show me the figures for how much it costs in-house,' and they showed them to me, and I said, 'Yeah, yeah, we could do for that.' But I had no idea. The TV exec's eyebrows raised, which should have been a warning sign. So the week before I had my second son, I was queuing up in the bank to open an account so that we could have a TV company to sign the contract with Bravo. We really were on an absolute shoestring budget with about three people, and I was writing the scripts with a newborn and a 15-month-old baby to look after.

How did you even have the concentration to write anything in that time?

It was really, really hard, but we got some really brilliant people in, and sometimes the researchers would help with the childcare. And it was the early days of digital TV, so by then we could use mini DVs with broadcast quality. We worked out how we could do it as cheaply as possible. We didn't pay ourselves very much, but we got paid enough to live.

And then we got commissioned for *Gamepad 3*, and we got a bit more money and moved into offices. We started doing more TV shows for other people, and I think the apex was when we got to *Gamepad 4* and we got a far bigger budget. But to be honest, when I got to the end of *Gamepad 4*, I was so tired. I'd been producing the show, writing the scripts and running the office with two small children, and it was very full on. So I decided I couldn't juggle so many things anymore, and that's when I decided to finally fulfil my destiny and become a writer, because I could do it around looking after the kids. Luckily, because I'm into technology, I got into the early days of digital media in public spaces. My first job was the National Waterfront Museum in Wales in 2004, which was a brand-new museum that had been designed from the ground up around digital media.

And do you still play videogames, or is that in the past?

I do, but I spend more time writing games and other interactive things these days than I do playing them. I've just been awarded Arts Council funding to explore new kinds of interactive narrative. So in the end I did become a writer, just not the kind I was expecting. *

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Readers can get involved at www.retrogamer.net/forum

THEALEX: What games most inspired your current role of creating interactive and immersive experiences for the public?

All of them. I constantly draw on my games experience in my work in all kinds of ways. It's like if you're a writer drawing on everything you've read as you were growing up. Back in the Eighties or Nineties, the storytelling and the gameplay was completely stripped back, so you can see it for what it is. Nowadays it's much more sophisticated, and you can't see the bones of it like you could back then. But what's really funny is that things come around again: there's very little true innovation in terms of storytelling and interaction, so anything you see, you can sort of work out where it's come from.

RETROBOB: What was the story behind you becoming a character in *Micro Machines 2*?

Codemasters rang me up and asked me whether I wanted to be in it, and of course I said yes. But I was a bit cautious, because what if they made me the really slow character? There's that whole thing of women drivers, etc, etc. So I said, 'Yeah, I will be in the game, but I want to be the fastest AI-controlled character.' But they went, 'Oh, you can't be the fastest, because Spider's always the fastest, but you can be the second fastest,' so I went with that. The grand irony of it is I haven't even got a driving licence in real life! Actually, I had a phone call a couple of years ago when they did the refresh of *Micro Machines* and they needed my permission to use my likeness.

ROSSI46: With the games industry being bigger than the movie and music industries combined, why do you think there are not loads more TV shows dedicated to gaming?

I would say that games got ahead of TV and proliferated across all the interactive, youthful media channels like Twitch, Discord and YouTube. It's like with telephones: some countries go straight to mobile and skip landlines. Videogames have leapfrogged traditional television and infiltrated the interactive world.

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OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast

THE DRIVE OF YOUR LIFE

» RETROREVIVAL

» PC » 2006 » SUMO DIGITAL

When *OutRun 2* hit arcades in 2003 I instantly fell in love with it. Sure there had been many sequels and spin-offs to Sega's iconic 1986 original, but for me, they never really did the game justice. From the moment I made my first ridiculous powerslide to the time it took me to complete the game's 15 European-themed courses, I knew a worthy sequel had finally arrived and it had only taken 17 years to achieve!

An impressive Xbox exclusive port by Sumo Digital arrived the following year as well as a new arcade sequel called *OutRun 2 SP*, which added 15 additional courses to race through with a distinctive New World setting. A home port was inevitable and Sumo Digital was once again behind the wheel and by goodness did the team absolutely smash it.

I adore *OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* and it's very rare that a week goes by without me getting a quick game in. Sumo's port across all systems is absolutely sensational, although special mention must go to the outrageously good PS2 and PSP ports (one day I'll be able to justify the high cost of the Japanese PS2 edition that exists). *Coast 2 Coast* not only includes all 15 tracks from *OutRun 2*, but also adds the *SP* tracks as well as a lengthy Coast 2 Coast mode which gives you a huge amount of challenges to achieve. It's the game that just keeps on giving.

As great as that new mode is, for me it's the simple pleasure of racing through the game's 30 stages that I love the most about *Coast 2 Coast*. It perfectly nails the outrageous drifting mechanics of the arcade games and that satisfying feeling you get from pulling past rivals and fulfilling the requirements of your girlfriend's many requests in Heart Attack mode. For me, the *OutRun* series has always been about enjoying the ride through exotic-looking locations, whilst humming along to toe-tapping tunes and that's never been as well represented as it is in *Coast 2 Coast*.

I love Sega's original *Out Run*, but if a gun was put to my head and I had to choose between the 1986 original and Sumo's own exceptional update, Yu Suzuki's classic wouldn't stand a chance. Sorry.

RETRORATED

>> This month we go for a cautious wander through Resident Evil Village, try our hand at photography in New Pokémon Snap and read the latest tomes from Hardcore Gaming 101 and Bitmap Books

» [PC] The imposing Lady Alcina Dimitrescu regularly stalks you as you explore her castle and she's bloody terrifying.

Resident Evil Village

CAPCOM'S SURVIVAL HORROR RELEASE IS A GAME OF TWO HALVES

INFORMATION

- **FORMAT REVIEWED** PC
- **ALSO ON:** PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES S/X
- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £49.99+
- **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM
- **DEVELOPER:** CAPCOM
- **PLAYERS:** 1

Horror comes in many forms and that's equally true of Capcom's eighth mainline entry in its acclaimed horror series. While it leans heavily on the creepy oppressive nature of the 2017 release, *Resident Evil 7*, it also has plenty of nods to the more action-orientated entries in the franchise, particularly *Resident Evil 4*. The end result is an oddly disjointed game at times, although it's nowhere near as fractured as the disappointing sixth game in the series.

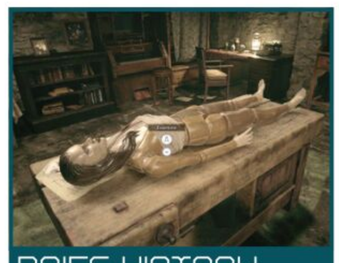
Village is a direct sequel to the 2017 game and once again puts you in the everyman shoes of Ethan Winters, who is enjoying a peaceful life of anonymity with his wife Mia and newborn daughter Rose. It's not long however before things take a tragic turn and Ethan finds himself trapped in a secluded village with no idea of his surroundings or the whereabouts of his precious daughter.

It's a strong opening and the tension only heightens as you slowly explore the deserted village and fend off the odd attack from fiendish-looking monsters, while solving surprisingly simplistic puzzles. Like its predecessor *Resident Evil Village* uses a first-person viewpoint to show off its world and it's a good decision, allowing you to really marvel at the tired-looking village and the bleak gothic architecture of the huge castle that hangs ominously over it. The lack of VR is a huge disappointment, but there's no denying how effective the horror is when it's up close and personal and often staring you directly in the face (and normally trying to take a bite out of you at the same time).

The village's castle is the home of Lady Alcina Dimitrescu, a huge imposing vampire who routinely stalks you through her stronghold, along with her three shape-shifting daughters. These tense encounters can come out of nowhere and dramatically ratchet up the tension as you frantically explore the beautifully decadent building in search of your precious daughter. Despite her prominence in most of the game's advertising, Dimitrescu is just one of four lords you'll need to best before finally coming face to face with the mastermind behind Rose's disappearance.

Each lord is locked away behind a different part of the village, effectively

»[PC] Ethan is adept at crafting everything from bullets to health potions, so make sure you search everything for suitable ingredients.



BRIEF HISTORY

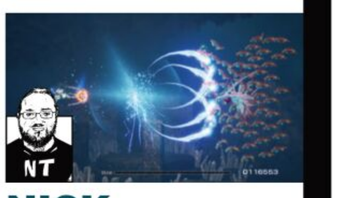
» The *Resident Evil* series made its debut on the PlayStation in 1996 and became a huge success for Capcom. Numerous sequels and spin-offs followed, with the 2005 release *Resident Evil 4* becoming notable for reinventing the series as an action franchise. The franchise pivoted again in 2017, opting to use a first-person perspective and embracing VR in the process. Brand-new remakes of *Resident Evil 2* and *3* followed in 2019 and 2020 and a VR overhaul of *Resident Evil 4* is set to be released later this year.

✱ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

New Pokémon Snap

I've always loved the N64 original, but this new Switch update improves things dramatically and is massively entertaining as a result. I've been constantly snapping Pokémon all month!



NICK

R-Type Final 2

After doing last month's cover feature, I was hankering for some new *R-Type*, and Granzella delivered exactly that.

» [PC] Enemies come in a variety of forms and they get more grotesque and twisted as your adventure continues.

SHOW ME YOUR WARES

Resident Evil 4's merchant has become the stuff of internet legend and there's every chance his *Village* counterpart, The Duke, will find similar fans. You'll encounter this larger than life character at many points during the game and he's equally adept at spewing exposition as he is at tooling your armoury. Initially you'll only be able to buy a few supplies from him, but you'll access more goodies as the game progresses.

The Duke not only caters for all your item needs but he'll also buy valuable gems and other trinkets from you, sell you new weapon parts and even upgrade your existing ones. He's a handy chap to know, but you'll need to search off the beaten track for treasures if you hope to buy some of his more expensive weapons.

Village's procurer and seller of goods is even a decent cook as well and if you hunt down the livestock that are found throughout the game he'll even create recipes that will do everything from boost your speed to increase your health.

» [PC] The Mercenaries is unlocked upon completing the game and it has been suitably enhanced over past versions.

» [PC] Puzzles have always been a highlight of the series, but the ones in *Village* are laughably easy.

» [PC] You'll encounter far more enemies in *Village*, so make sure you don't get overwhelmed.

working as standalone levels, and while you end up racing through the domains of some, they're all filled with memorable encounters that will often have you jumping out of your chair or uttering plenty of unintentional swears as yet another jump scare tears an obscenity from your lips. Highlights include a tense encounter against a water-based foe that has you crossing a submerged village as you desperately try to find a way to drain it and even out the fight, along with a truly terrifying encounter in the stately home of Donna Beneviento. Stripped of your weapons during this section, you're stuck in a deadly game of cat and mouse as you attempt to escape her home whilst being attacked by creepy dolls and a disturbing talking puppet called Angie.

There's some truly messed up shit in Capcom's game and as you slowly unlock the village's many secrets the denizens you face become even more terrifying. By the time you reach the factory of Karl Heisenberg, who can directly manipulate metal, you'll find yourself in full body-horror territory with ghoulish creations enhanced by metal implants and drills which could have sprung from the minds of Shinya Tsukamoto or David Cronenberg, they're that scary. It's here that the action begins to ramp up as well and as a result the game loses some of its focus. While there's a good range of weapons to discover in *Village* they don't always feel impactful to use like in earlier games in the series. Many of the enemies soak up bullets like sponges, which diminishes much of the terror that's laid out in the game's earlier sections.

This shift in tone is also found in protagonist Ethan Winters. He's something of an odd hero, generally spending most of his time terrified or bewildered by his surroundings and blindly devoted to his daughter's safety, only to spit out atrociously poor one-liners when he finally bests a lord or wrangles himself out of another dangerous situation. Granted, dialogue and story strands have never been a strength of the series, but both feel particularly trite here and remind you that for all the stunning visuals and cinematic sections, you're still just playing a videogame.

While *Village*'s story rarely hits the right beats, the same can't be said for its overall pace. It's certainly a lean game taking around ten hours to complete, but we'll take pacing over padding any day of the week. Yes it means that some areas feel like they're over far too quickly – we'd have loved to have spent more time in Beneviento's creepy home for example – but it also ensures that you're always being kept busy and the many highs you encounter easily outweigh the lows. Puzzles, which have always been a big part of the series, also feel underdeveloped and there's nothing in here that's as clever as some of those found in its 2017 counterpart.

Although it doesn't offer the same unique experiences as its predecessor managed, *Resident Evil Village* still has the power to shock and entertain, and ultimately that's all we really want from the popular series. *

In a nutshell

Yes the loss of VR is disappointing and the action feels a little forced in its closing chapter, but *Village* remains an entertaining edition to Capcom's bonkers horror series.

>> Score **77%**

★ PICK OF THE MONTH

R-Type Final 2

» **System:** PS4 (tested), PC, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S » **Buy it from:** Retail, online » **Buy it for:** £34.99+

When it comes to Kickstarter revivals of classic games, we've come to expect that they are made squarely with the backers in mind – people who love the old formula enough that they'll pay up front for more of it, years in advance. With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that *R-Type Final 2* doesn't deliver much in the way of surprises or innovation, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing when the underlying structure is so very good.

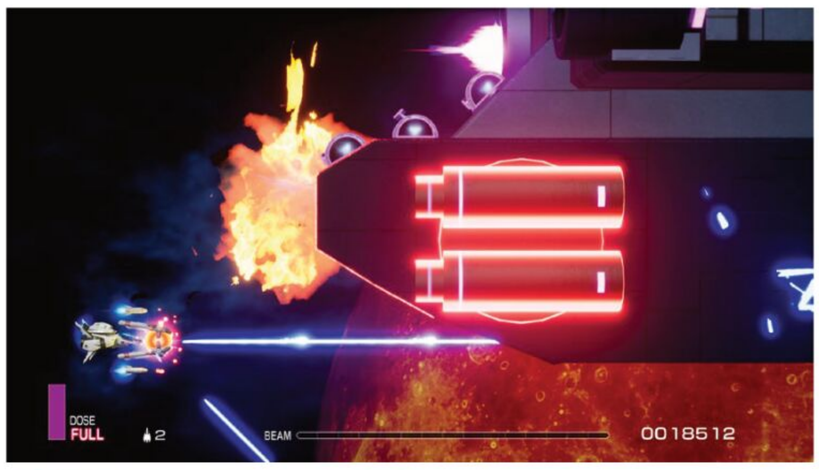
R-Type Final 2 feels like a celebration of the series as a whole, with all of your favourite features present and correct – Dobkeratops makes an appearance, you'll take down another giant battleship, and the Force feels just as satisfying to use as it ever did. There are dozens of ships on offer too, each with their own weapon selections and Force behaviours, and this time you get to craft them using materials gained from completing stages. The game has a more upbeat atmosphere than its predecessor on the whole, while the shorter stages actually benefit the pace of the game.

Of course, the game isn't without its faults. While it does mostly look quite nice, there are moments when background detail is astonishingly sparse and low budget, and in later stages we experienced some slowdown. And while it's not necessarily a fault, *R-Type* games have always been characterised by their punishing difficulty and heavy reliance on memorisation. Even on the easier difficulty settings, you should expect to die a lot before achieving victory.

Though it shouldn't take long to beat the game, there are alternate routes throughout to be found and if you're still hankering for more after that, the first of three announced DLC packages is already available with two extra stages for £5.79. Though it is slightly rough around the edges in places, *R-Type Final 2* is a really solid piece of work from Granzella, which should satisfy any fan of the series.

» Score **80%**

»[PS4] As always, the Force gets to areas that other power-ups just can't reach.



»[PS4] The battleship's size is spectacular, but the texture detail isn't quite as impressive.

A Guide To Japanese Role-Playing Games

» **Buy it from:** bitmapbooks.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £34.99

Bitmap Books has once again outdone itself with an incredibly lavish book, this time devoted to Japanese RPGs. Although it's disappointingly short on interview content, it does an excellent job of breaking the genre down into numerous parts, from a history of the genre to localisation, soundtracks and even remakes. Every big franchise is covered as you'd expect, but it's the more obscure titles that offer the best insight, as several of the games featured were completely new to us. Like this month's shmup book, there's very little here that will surprise fans of the genre, but it remains a comprehensive read and a brilliant introduction to anyone with an interest in the genre.

DARRAN JONES

New Pokémon Snap

» **System:** Switch » **Buy it from:** Online, retail
» **Buy it for:** £49.99

Nintendo's snap-'em-up has always been one of our favourite *Pokémon* spin-offs and this new edition does nothing to dampen that. It takes the mechanics of the N64 original, but adds improvements ensuring there's plenty of longevity as you tour around looking for the perfect Pokémon shot. Each level is filled with shortcuts to discover and it's even possible to upgrade stages if your skills are good enough, which unlocks more Pokémon to snap and other secrets. Your camera has also been upgraded and it's now possible to add filters and share images online. While the new story feels a little throwaway, the strategy behind getting the best images is as strong as it ever was. Here's hoping we don't wait over 20 years for a sequel.

DARRAN JONES

» Score **80%**

Hardcore Gaming 101 Presents: The Guide To Shoot-'Em-Ups Volume 2

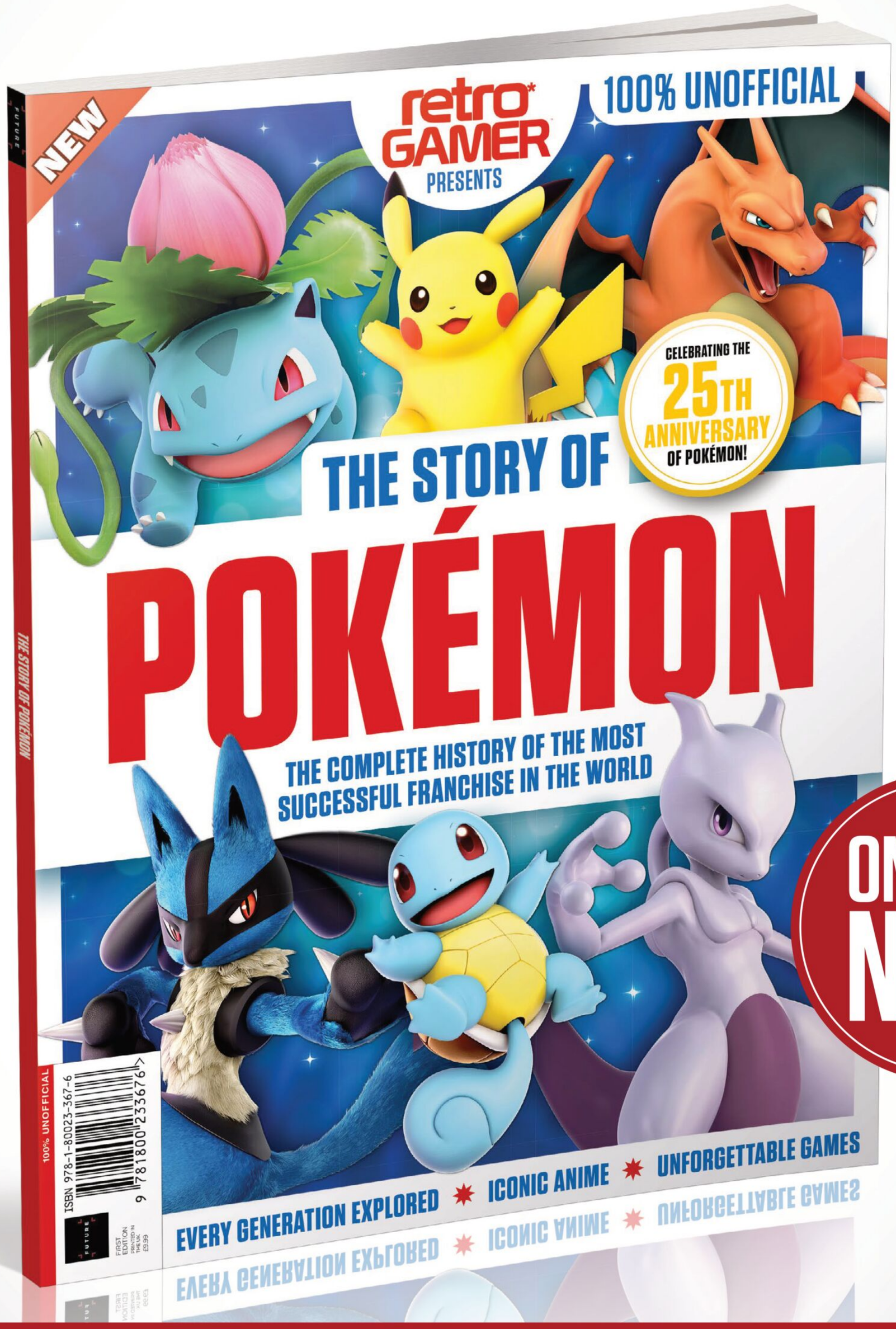
» **Buy it from:** amazon.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £19, £6.24 (Kindle)

We're big fans of Hardcore Gaming 101 and we always enjoy a new book release from Kurt Kalata's team. As with previous titles in the series, this second volume is a mix of existing web content as well as brand-new material and it makes for interesting reading. While it's a shame that there is no interview content, the authors behind the book clearly know their shmups, so you'll find detailed accounts of a huge range of shooters, from *Flying Shark* and the *Strikers 1945* series to a whole range of Toaplan classics. Home conversions are covered too, with comprehensive looks at all the different versions of *Xevious* for example. The end result is a great read for anyone that loves shmups.

DARRAN JONES

A WORLD OF DREAMS AND ADVENTURES WITH POKÉMON AWAITS. LET'S GO!

Embark on a journey from the very first generation of Pokémon, all the way to the eighth. On the way, you'll delve deep into the stories behind the videogames, television series and more. Get ready to catch 'em all!



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HOT TOPIC

RETROBATES MULL OVER THE SCENE'S MOST INTRIGUING ISSUES

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

The games we hate, despite popular opinion

DARRAN JONES

NICK THORPE

TIM EMPEY

It would be a dull world if we all agreed on everything, and while it's sometimes easy to understand what others see in games we don't like, other times we're left totally baffled. With that in mind, let's find out which games the **Retro Gamer** team has spicy hot takes on.

NICK So, which highly rated games did you guys fail to get on with? Feel like slaying any sacred cows?

DARRAN Let's make some beef sandwiches!

TIM Speaking of cows… *Red Dead Redemption II*.

DARRAN How so? What don't you like about it.

TIM EVERYTHING! The setting, the characters, the story and the stupid amount of time I tried to convince myself I was enjoying the online portion. Oh, and having to tap the button to sprint.

DARRAN You must have loved reading Drew's Future Classic last issue then! I must admit, I loved the first, but haven't found time for the sequel yet. I'm waiting for a price drop on PC – I read an article about bird-watching in the game and it's made me want to play it, purely because of that.

NICK So how about you, Darran? I'm curious as to what kind of beef sandwich you're making.

DARRAN I'm making a sandwich with a healthy dollop of *Shenmue* and *Shenmue II* in it.

NICK That sounds like a very large, expensive sandwich that would take forever to make. I reckon it'd be tasty though.

TIM With you on that, Darran. That stupid tree at the end of *II*.

DARRAN The end of *II*, Tim? I didn't bloody get past the arcade. I've never got past the arcade in any of them. My biggest issue was the promise of pure interaction. When you're in Ryo's house, you're like, "This is amazing," but the further you move away, the less interaction you actually have. It's the first time I've ever been hoodwinked by the promises of the developer.

NICK I can see how you'd feel let down. There's a lot of detail that doesn't need to be there, and it's not often used in ways that actually enhance the gameplay experience in any way.

» [PS4] When it comes to his opinion on *Red Dead Redemption II*, Tim is very much a lone ranger. [Very good - Ed].

» [PS4] Would Darran have got further in *Shenmue II* if it didn't feature games he simply likes more? Maybe…

DARRAN So come on, Nick. This is where you tell us that *Sonic The Hedgehog* is overrated and not as good as *Sonic 2*.

NICK Honestly, I like *Sonic 2* – it's just that it's got some really cheap moments in it, like those bastard mantis bots in Metropolis Zone. Plus, I like the way you really have to earn momentum in the original game, and the addition of the spin dash does away with that a bit. It's definitely not the best *Sonic* game like people say it is, though. However, the game I do truly detest is *Diablo II*.

DARRAN Wowsers!

TIM I didn't play much of *Diablo II* but I have 'completed' *Diablo III*.

NICK I just couldn't get into the game. Click click click, that enemy's dead. Start clicking the next one. Repeat ad nauseam. Honestly, I know there's some looting and inventory management to do, but if the majority of what I'm doing is mindless clicking, *Cookie Clicker* is better.

DARRAN Says the man who presses right to win *Sonic* games!

NICK I am the best presser of right, though.

TIM Speaking of going right… I can't stand Mario, himself or the games. Might be because I worked on a Nintendo mag for quite a long time.

DARRAN Did they force you to play through *Hotel Mario* as a rite of passage, because that would put me off the series.

TIM No, but I had to play *Sunshine* and that was bad enough.

DARRAN Working on *Cube* must have been a terrible experience with all those *Mario* games!

TIM "It's-a-me! Wahooo!" The snivelling little b…

NICK Before we stop being family-friendly, Darran, do you have any others?

DARRAN Yes I do, several in fact. I thought *Mass Effect 2* was decent, but nothing spectacular, I likewise thought *BioShock* was massively overrated (and the rest of the series for that matter) and I'm not the biggest fan of *Jet Set Willy*.

NICK I liked *BioShock* a lot, but I hate it now because it makes me throw up.

DARRAN I'm amazed you were able to play it with your weak first-person shooter tolerance.

NICK That was in 'the before times'. Speaking of things I can't tolerate, I hated the *Resident Evil 2* remake – it's a fantastically well-made game, but I have a phobia of zombies. The whole experience of reviewing it nearly broke me.

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» [PC] Nick might be less averse to *Diablo II* if he hadn't spent countless hours watching a friend play it.

» [PC] Aside from being funnelled down bland corridors, Darran felt Mass Effect 2's script was extremely dull.

DARRAN Well that just serves you right for completing the original game before me. So Tim, are there any other games you think are overrated?

TIM *Gears Of Bore*, I just can't get on with them. They're just intensely dull games, and there's far too much talking.

DARRAN I think it's the only franchise I can think of where the necks of characters get specifically wider with each new release.

NICK Speaking of games beginning with G… good lord the older *Gran Turismo* games. It's the most realistic console racing series, but you can't damage your car. There are a million cars, and most of them aren't actually ones you'd race with without being forced to. The licence test tedium, the robotic enemy racers. Yeah, they're big. Yeah, they look good. But are they fun? Not in my book.

DARRAN Ooof! That's a gut punch and a half. I actually don't mind the early games, but agree the AI makes for dull racing. On the subject of critical PlayStation games, I'm not super keen on any *Final Fantasy* games that don't have card minigames in them.

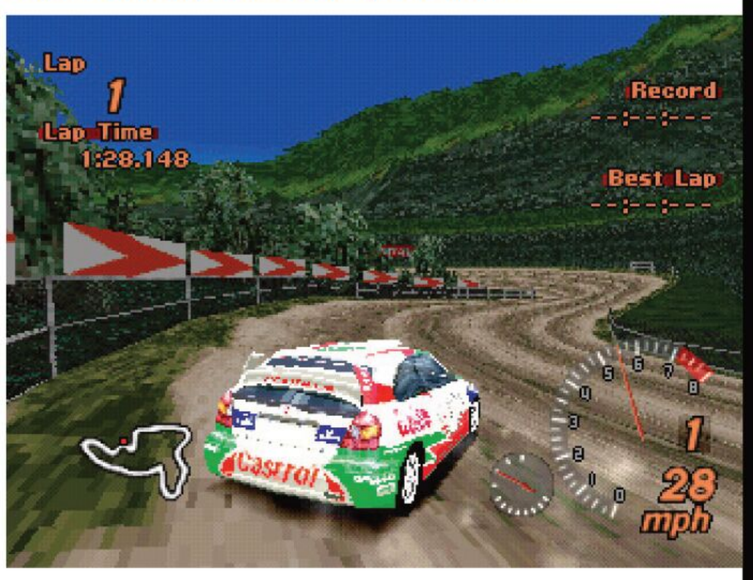
TIM "The random rule has been introduced"…

DARRAN Apparently there was a standalone release of Triple Triad which sounds amazing, but is probably rather expensive now.

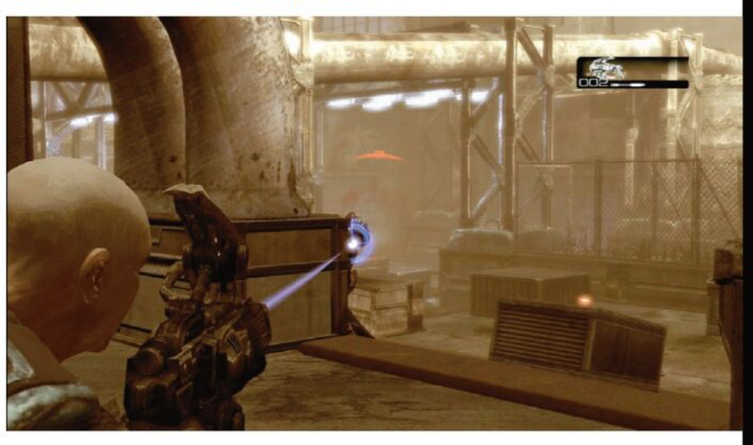
TIM Anyone up for a game of Lucky Hit?

DARRAN Now that's one thing I did like about *Shenmue*. Maybe I'll give it another try…

» [ZX Spectrum] While Darran can appreciate the scope of *Jet Set Willy*, it lacks the tightly-focused level design of *Manic Miner*.



» [PlayStation] Seeing a Toyota on a dirt road just reminds Nick that he'd rather be playing *Sega Rally*.



» [Xbox 360] *Gears Of War* is an icon of the 'Brown Age' of videogames, but Tim found it to be rather uninteresting.

» [GameCube] Despite working on *Cube* for years, Tim never developed a Stockholm syndrome bond with Mario.

READERS REACT

The games we hate, despite popular opinion

Stephen Smith
Zool on the Amiga: looks great, but suffers from slowdowns in framerates, annoying, respawning enemies, horrible janky controls, especially the wall jumps – it never deserved the massive scores it got in the Amiga mags.

Randall Joyal
The *Grand Theft Auto* games. It has always been difficult to have such open-world 'freedom' yet be incapable of following a path of anything other than crime.

Antonio Strijdom
The Last Of Us. A triumph of story over gameplay (and the story ain't that great).

Robert August de Meijer
Resident Evil 4. Its subpar gameplay combined with subpar cinematics. And it has QTEs to boot!

Alzorath
Hate is a bit of a strong word, but *Halo*, while I get the appeal, has always just felt like the cheese toastie of first-person shooters.

Steven Leatherland
Assassin's Creed. I was OK with the game when it's set back in time, it's the futuristic crap they put it in that ruined it for me. One minute you're riding a horse around Jerusalem, next minute you're sitting in a chair while someone extracts memories?

Davey Sloan
All the Ultimate isometric games. Yes astonishing technical achievements, but just fiddly and annoying to play.

William Bargery
Ico and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Could never appreciate the art style and direction the games took.

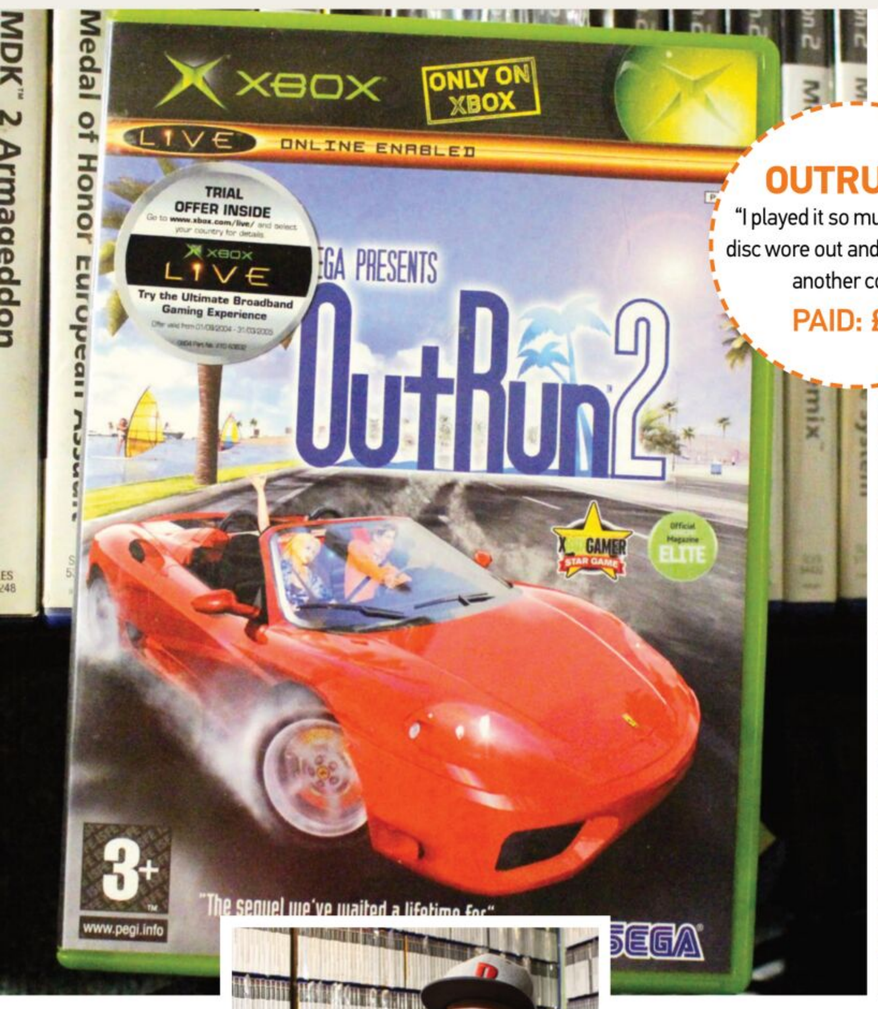
AmigaJay
Any new *FIFA*! The morons paying EA for different versions costing £90, then paying them more for micro payments and God knows what else year after year. You can't blame EA when there's so many suckers out there.

Ainsley Bowstead
The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild. People laud the open-world nature, but to me it feels aimless. I also don't like how all your weapons break, as I'm the kind of player who hoards good items 'for later', so I spend all my time avoiding combat.

C64reloaded
Paperboy (Arcade). Nice graphics and cool BMX handlebars controller can't mask a dull and repetitive game.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

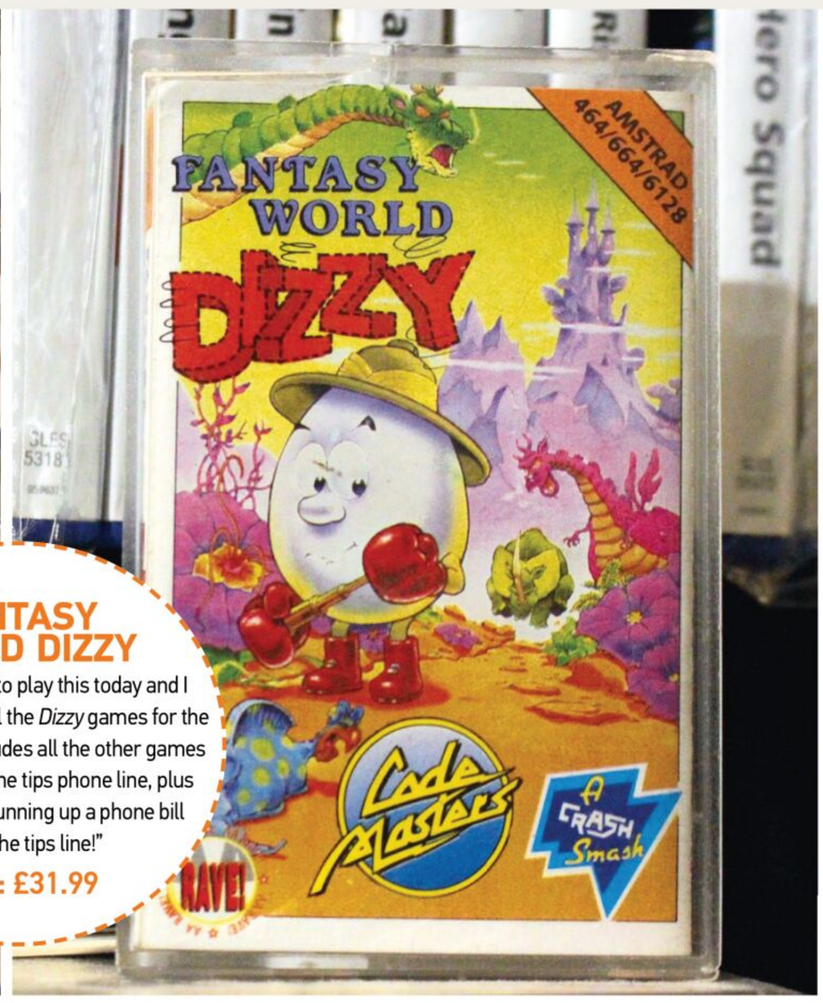
READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**



OUTRUN 2

"I played it so much that my disc wore out and I had to buy another copy!"

PAID: £60



FANTASY WORLD DIZZY

"I still come back to play this today and I went on to collect all the *Dizzy* games for the CPC. Total cost includes all the other games and £10 spent on the tips phone line, plus a grounding for running up a phone bill calling the tips line!"

PAID: £31.99

BIO

NAME:
Zoë Kirk-Robinson

LOCATION:
Greater Manchester, UK

FAVOURITE GAME:
OutRun 2006:
Coast 2 Coast

FAVOURITE SYSTEM:
PlayStation 2

COLLECTION WORTH:
"Well into the thousands"

TWITTER:
@ZoeKirkRobinson

HAMMER TIME

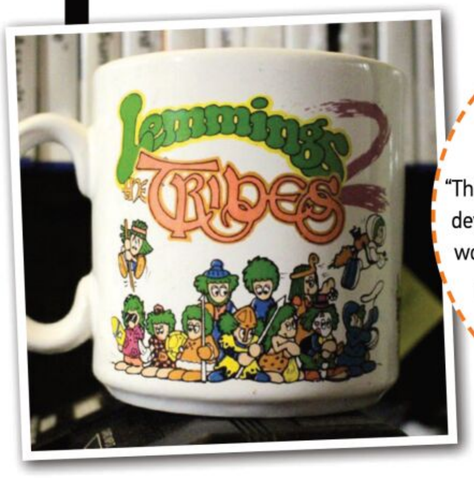
Hitting the nail on the head with an impressive collection

For PlayStation 2 fan Zoë, the successful console represents the last time when videogames could be truly considered retro. "It was the last bastion of the old style of gaming," she tells **Retro Gamer**, "where you got everything on the disc and that was that. No patches, no downloads and only a handful of games where you needed to be online to play." And it's not just the lack of reliance on online that endears her to Sony's console. "It's set apart from the rest of its generation by the size of its library – with over 2,000 games to choose from, it was a system where there was literally something for everyone. It even has BASIC, which is a huge plus point for me since I first fell in love with the Amstrad CPC through being able to code my own games."

While her Amstrad collection is not quite as exhaustive as her PS2 one, the Eighties computer will always remain an affectionate first love for Zoë. "It gets a lot of stick online because it took third place behind the Spectrum and C64, but I adore the feel of the chunky keys on the 464 and the whole look of the system is a delight." We can almost see Darran nodding sagely in the background [I am – ED], and Zoë has gone one step further, bringing her filmmaking skills to the fore in a documentary series about the maligned series of computers. "Each episode covers the life of the CPC, from development through to the mid-Nineties – so far I've managed to cover the CPC's first year of life, so there's a long way to go!" Making the series has led to Zoë discovering many new games beyond her favourites such as *Space Hawk*, *Fantasy World Dizzy* and *Chase HQ*. "It's always fun to bring hidden gems to people's attention," she says.

Also on YouTube is Zoë's main channel, GameHammer, and it is here where the PlayStation 2 gets a more regular outing. With almost 80% of the console's library already in her possession, there are some expensive games left for her to acquire, and as with most videogame collectors, there are regrets. "I had a chance to pick up *Gregory Horror Show* a few years ago for £20, but had to pass because the inlay was yellow and it stank of smoke. Now it's going for over three times that, so part of me keeps wondering if I could have restored it."

As a former Conservative Party councillor, writer, filmmaker and cartoonist, Zoë is clearly multi-talented. Other than retro gaming and collecting, her work for LGBT rights and providing support for the LGBT community is also notable. "I'm happy to say that [within the retro community] most people don't care if you're LGBT any more, which is exactly how it should be," she notes. "However, in videogames, LGBT representation has a long way to go – either we aren't there at all, or the games are three quarters full of gay people, both of which are unrealistic. At some point we'll find a happy medium – that's the hope anyway!" *



LEMMINGS 2: THE TRIBES MUG

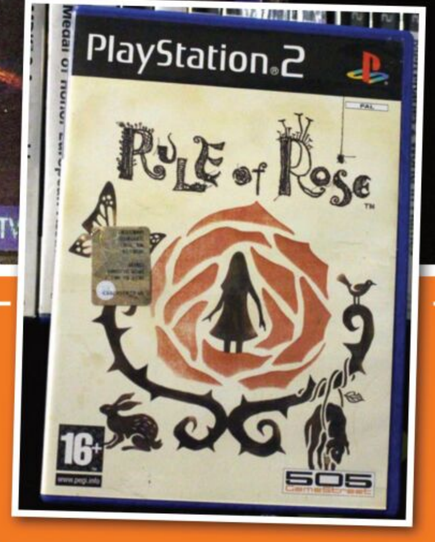
"This was given to me by a friend of the development team at Psygnosis. It's a wonderful mug and it holds a special place in my collection thanks to where it came from."

PAID: £0

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

GUITAR HERO: VAN HALEN
"I've been a fan of the *Guitar Hero* series since the start of the series. I started hunting around for the final game to complete the PAL set, but because it was only released in Australia I didn't expect to be able to find it easily. Imagine my surprise when an almost-new copy showed up on eBay UK!"
PAID: £40

SPACE HAWKS
"The first game I ever played and I still have my original copy. I absolutely adored playing it back in 1985."
PAID: £0 (BUNDLED WITH COMPUTER)



JEWEL IN THE CROWN

RULE OF ROSE

■ "It's THE rare game for the PS2 and I never expected to be able to find a copy at a price I could afford. I don't agree with the people who wanted it banned, but I can sort of see why they weren't happy with it being out there."

PAID: £190

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

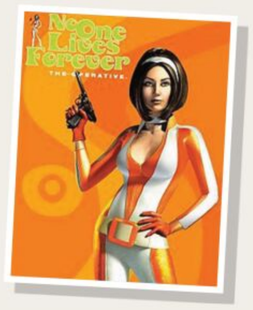
THE COVER STAR

There's good news for fans of the blue hedgehog looking to buy or rebuy the original games: with most of them best sellers, there is no shortage of CIB copies of most of the Mega Drive games and beyond. For the first two games expect to pay no more than **£10** each including postage. Prices then begin to rise, with the third game and *Sonic & Knuckles* often selling for more than double that. The Mega-CD game *Sonic CD* is mid-range for the console, selling for between **£50** and **£85.**

THEY STOLE A MILLION

While not exactly common, the cassette versions of this excellent strategy game regularly sell for under **£10** – what a steal! A disk version of the Commodore 64 original will set you back a lot more with some online retailers offering it for as much as **£50.**

NO ONE LIVES FOREVER



This Sixties set spy caper is cheap on PlayStation 2, with copies rarely selling for more than **£5** posted on eBay. The PC original is from after the end of the big box era and therefore also cheap in a standard DVD case at around **£5-£10.**

OINK!

The CRL adaptation of the comic is a difficult game to find in its original form, although it still shouldn't set you back more than **£15-£20** posted. Budget re-releases such as the one pictured are a cheaper way of discovering its porcine-related charms, usually selling for under **£5.**

VAGRANT STORY

Prices vary with this PlayStation RPG. However, a patient and savvy buyer should be able to get a good condition and complete PAL copy for under **£50.**

SPY VS SPY

Publishers First Star and Beyond Software used cardboard boxes making good condition copies of its games rare on the 8-bit computers. Expect to pay **£15** plus for boxed copies with the NES game going for **£8-10** (cart only) and **£20-£30** (boxed).

HOW MUCH?!

SHANTAE

Released after the Game Boy Advance had been unveiled by Nintendo, this late-era Game Boy Color game is one of the more expensive titles on the handheld. Even a cart on its own will command at least **£400,** but it's the auction of a CIB Shantae that recently caught our eye. The final price was an eye-watering **£1,370** spread over 22 bids and 10 bidders. Not bad for a starting price of just **£1.99.**

Prices correct at time of print

MY RETRO LIFE

PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT OUR **SHARED PASSION**

ENDLESS RUNNER

Why I'm still going fast with Sonic three decades on

As we look back on 30 years of Sonic The Hedgehog this month, I've been doing a bit of thinking about how I relate to Sega's speedy mascot. It's no secret that I'm a fan, but it does go a bit beyond that – far beyond that, in fact. The truth is that there is barely an aspect of my life that hasn't somehow been affected by the *Sonic* series, from the way I spend my leisure time to the job I do, and even the people I hang out with.

I was on board with Sonic from the very beginning, and if you've ever wanted a demonstration of the power of TV advertising, this is probably about as convincing as it gets. I had some early experience of videogames, mostly through my dad's Atari 2600, but *Sonic* wasn't like anything I'd seen before – the game looked a world apart from what I knew, and Sonic himself was more than a sprite, he was a full on character. When my dad started talking about getting a Mega Drive, I don't think I knew anything else about the system, but I was desperate for him to get *Sonic* with it. He did, and the game lived up to all of the expectations of my five-year-old mind – though I did pass him the pad whenever I encountered a boss.

My parents were already divorced by this point, so I only got to play *Sonic* when I visited my dad on Saturdays. That all changed when mum bought me a Master System for my sixth birthday, and then dad gave me my own copy of *Sonic*. Over the course of 1993, with the introduction of *Sonic The Comic* and the *Adventures Of Sonic The Hedgehog* cartoon, Sonic became a full blown obsession – I could play as Sonic, read about Sonic and watch Sonic. Sonic and his friends even became a part of dinner time, thanks to the HP pasta shapes. It genuinely got to the point that on one memorable visit to see my grandparents, I was offered a tiny Sonic bag – but only on the condition that I did not utter a single word about the Sonic for the entire day.

Of course, Sonic faded from prominence in the mid-Nineties and for a little while, I wasn't as invested as I had been. Without a major *Sonic* game to draw me to the Saturn, I got a PlayStation like most other gamers, so when *Sonic Adventure* was first announced it was like the return of an old friend. I lived for even the slightest scrap of coverage in *CVG* and *GamesMaster*, and when Toys R Us got a demo pod with the E3 demo in the summer of 1999, I stood there for at least half an hour seeing everything there was to see. Looking back, I probably really annoyed a whole bunch of kids who didn't get to touch it, but I couldn't have cared less at the time.

Around the time Sega hit the ejector seat button and left the console market, I discovered the online *Sonic* community. The *Official Dreamcast Magazine* had shown off the *Sonic Crackers* prototype, an experimental Mega Drive thing that ultimately became *Knuckles Chaotix*, which I'd vaguely remembered reading about on *Digitiser* some time beforehand. Online research directed me to a site called *Sonic The Hedgehog* Area 51, which was full of images of lost content and prototype stuff that revealed a whole side to the classic games that I'd never known about. The obsession was back.

I joined the Area 51 forum, and made friends there as well as on a *Sonic The Comic* mailing list. I dived into the ROM hacking scene, and eventually became the maintainer of a mod archive. The first website I ever made, was a listing of Action Replay codes that would achieve some of the same effects on real hardware. By 2003, a few of us decided to meet up offline in order to see an early demo of *Sonic Heroes*, and from that we began to meet up a few times every year. In 2011, I was given the chance to interview Yuji Naka and Takashi Iizuka for the community at Summer Of Sonic – something which probably looked pretty good on my CV when I applied for my current job.

NICK'S PICKS

THE LESS CELEBRATED SONIC GAMES THAT YOU SHOULD REALLY CHECK OUT

SEGASONIC THE HEDGEHOG

This isometric trackball-controlled arcade game is a real oddball entry in the series, but anyone who likes *Sonic* should play it at least once just for the alternative take.

SONIC R

It may be incredibly short, but all the secret routes and items in this racing/platform hybrid fascinate me and it's a shame that nobody's ever developed the concept further.

SONIC POCKET ADVENTURE

It lifts a lot from the Mega Drive games, but the really special thing about this Neo Geo Pocket version is the puzzle pieces – you'll be searching high and low for them.

SONIC RUSH

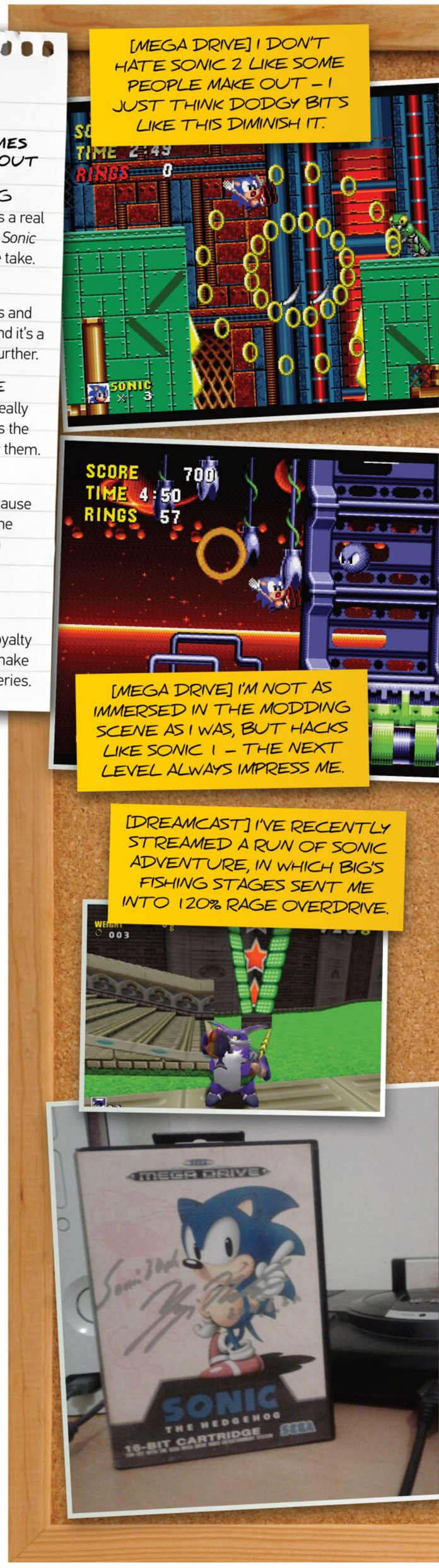
People forget how great Sonic's DS debut was because the home console games at the time sucked. The soundtrack is awesome and the game design changed the series.

SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED

Everyone loves *Mario Kart*, but get past the brand loyalty – the three racing styles and transforming tracks make Sumo Digital's classic as good as anything in that series.

When *Sonic Mania* came in for review a few years back, I went home and clocked it the next night. Darran told me that I looked "disgustingly happy" or something to that effect when I came in the next day, and I absolutely was – I couldn't wipe the ridiculous grin off my face. I loved it because it was a brilliant game that perfectly recaptured the joy I felt playing those early games, but I loved it just as much because it was birthed from a community that I was part of. It's a community that has had quite a few people work for Sega, a community that has been involved in plenty of prototype discoveries and emulation breakthroughs. I've seen touching tributes to members that passed, and I've seen people move half way across the world to marry one another, all through chance meetings because they like *Sonic The Hedgehog* games.

Some people wonder what keeps me going. Plenty of *Sonic* games have been bad, and there will be more in the future. But I look forward to the next time I smile like I did playing *Sonic Mania*, or the next time a discovery like the *Sonic 1* prototype floors me. Nothing else has the same effect. Most of all though, it's the community – and I'm really looking forward to seeing my friends again soon. ✱


[MEGA DRIVE] I DON'T HATE SONIC 2 LIKE SOME PEOPLE MAKE OUT – I JUST THINK DODGY BITS LIKE THIS DIMINISH IT.
TIME 2:49
RINGS 0
SONIC × 3
SCORE 700
TIME 4:50
RINGS 57
[MEGA DRIVE] I'M NOT AS IMMERSED IN THE MODDING SCENE AS I WAS, BUT HACKS LIKE SONIC 1 – THE NEXT LEVEL ALWAYS IMPRESS ME.
[DREAMCAST] I'VE RECENTLY STREAMED A RUN OF SONIC ADVENTURE, IN WHICH BIG'S FISHING STAGES SENT ME INTO 120% RAGE OVERDRIVE.
MEGA DRIVE
SONIC
THE HEDGEHOG
16-BIT CARTRIDGE
SEGA

HERE I AM, 21 WITH DREADFUL HAIR AND NO SMILE, NEXT TO THE WONKY SONIC MADE INFAMOUS BY UK:RESISTANCE.
HERE'S THE MOMENT MY DAD GAVE ME MY VERY FIRST SONIC GAME! I'VE STILL GOT IT, NATURALLY.
THIS WAS TAKEN ON MY FIRST TRIP OUT OF THE RETRO GAMER OFFICE, THOUGH I WAS ACTUALLY AT SEGA TO TALK ABOUT CRAZY TAXI.
SOMETHING DARRAN SAID HERE CRACKED ME UP, BUT IT MEANT A LOT FOR ME TO DO A SONIC COVER.
[MASTER SYSTEM] I THINK THE 8-BIT SONIC GAMES ARE STILL GREAT, THANKS TO THEIR UNIQUE STAGES AND MECHANICS.
I TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE YUJI NAKA SIGN MY MEGA DRIVE COPY OF THE ORIGINAL GAME BACK IN 2011.
[MEGA DRIVE] THIS WAS THE EARLY CONCEPT PROTOTYPE THAT DREW ME DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE OF INTERNET SONIC FANDOM.
retro GAMER
SONIC
SONIC
TIME ATTACK 0'08"48
RINGS 0/100
60
1:31

WHICH GAMES TRULY CHANGED YOUR LIFE?

Readers reveal the gaming obsessions that developed into something more

Jen
It's *Sonic* for me too; I actually met my husband because of *Sonic*! We met on a *Sonic* forum in the early Noughties, with him being in the US and me in the UK, so we wouldn't have found each other without that. We both also have an amazing group of friends who we met on the same forum.

Dean Foster
GTA IV. It made me quit smoking cannabis. Badman was becoming very paranoid through smoking and I could relate to his psychosis. Schizophrenia and paranoia are not fun. Crazy that it took a videogame character to show me.

Cubism
GoldenEye 007. Before that I never played multiplayer with friends. A chance discussion with an old friend on the bus home from school revealed we'd both gotten N64s recently. We gathered up two more friends and '*GoldenEye* Night' became a Friday/Saturday night ritual. Still friends!

Dale Muir
Donkey Kong Country 2 – it really made me pay attention to music. Now I play in a videogame cover band!

Dan P
Alex Kidd In Miracle World on the Sega Master System which I played as a kid whilst in hospital. After that I received one as a gift and my fascination with videogames began.

Anthony Bull
Playing *The Black Cauldron* as an 11-year-old, after I had been obsessed with the books, made me decide I wanted to learn to program, which then turned into my career.

MAILBAG

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WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of either our NES/Master System or SNES/Mega Drive books

STAR LETTER

A JOURNEY FOR THE AGES

Dear fellow Sega fanboys,
For me, *Out Run* was the game that couldn't be beaten. You see, the other games at the arcade let you shove in extra quarters to see the rest of their content, but not *Out Run*. Even better players couldn't show me the later stages of the game. The home conversions didn't count: they didn't look as rad and I swear they all had extended timers. By the time the faithful Saturn version was released, I had lost all interest. That was, until *Yakuza 0* challenged me. It turned out that defeating the Japanese mafia with my knuckles was far easier than beating the five-minute drive in *Out Run*, which you can play in the arcade. Still humiliated, I got the Switch version. It took me about 70 tries, but now I've finally completed all five courses. Congratulations! But in all fairness, the controls in the arcade are different, so to me, this was just a practice run. I happen to know of a sit-in cabinet in Amsterdam. Wish me luck! Sega!
Robert August de Meijer
PS: Is *Magical Sound Shower* the catchiest song ever?

Thanks for writing to us, Robert. Wow, so it has taken you around 35 years to beat Sega's racer? That's some real dedication and it deserves a reward, so have a book for your troubles.
PS: Don't read pages 98 and 99, Darran's opinions on *Out Run* may upset you!

» [Switch] Robert finally completed *Out Run* on Switch. What game has taken you an age to complete?

» [Amiga] We'll make sure *Magic Pockets* gets due coverage in the mag soon.

POWER POCKETS

Dear **Retro 'the best mag on the shelf' Gamer**,
Many years ago, I used to play on my Atari ST and subscribed to an Atari mag and they often used to put demo disks on the cover. One month I bought the magazine and on the front was a disk which included a fantastic demo of the Bitmap Brothers' game called *Magic Pockets*.

In the past I know you have interviewed the developers but you don't seem to have covered this game. I played the demo over and over again, but at the time could not afford the final game, and now it's quite hard to find. Did the Bitmap Brothers decide to cull this title, because I have noticed that it's not on the new Evercade cartridge either? This seems quite strange as it was one of the developer's first releases.

Keep up all the great work and keep safe and dandy!
Sean Watson

We're glad you enjoy *Magic Pockets*, Sean. We've spoken to Blaze and it's not on the new Evercade cart due to there being no home console port. It's certainly not in the same league as *Speedball 2* or *The Chaos Engine*, but it does have a cracking intro. We'll aim to get it featured in the magazine soon.

» [PC] Side-scrolling fighters are back in fashion and we couldn't be happier.

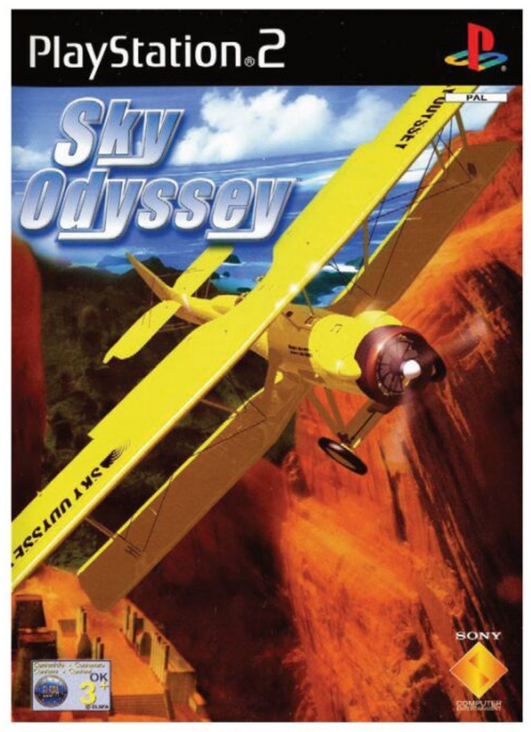
RETURN OF THE KING

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Please, please, please can you run an article on the resurgence of the side-scrolling fighter? It's my favourite genre and has been largely forgotten about, but it has come back with a bang in the last few years and I couldn't be happier. I've enjoyed your coverage of games like *River City Girls* and *Streets Of Rage 4*, so it would be great if you could visit the genre in more detail.
Chris North

Great to find another side-scrolling fighter fan, Chris. We've been very happy too. With all the new games coming out (the new *Turtles* release looks great) your request is certainly something we can consider. Leave it with us.

TO THE SKIES

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I recently dug out my old copy of a PlayStation 2 game called *Sky Odyssey*. It's an arcade-based flight simulator game and I had a blast completing it again. I actually think



» Darran snapped up *Sky Odyssey* for just £3. *Dynamite Deka* on Saturn was a lot more expensive.

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» [PC] Yes we love console games, but we're big PC nuts as well. Look out for more PC coverage in incoming issues.

it's a bit of a hidden gem. I can't find much information online about it so I thought it would make for an interesting feature. Is anyone on the team aware of it or a fan of it?
Matt Reynolds

Hi Matt, thanks for sharing with us. While Darran hasn't played it, freelancer John Szczepaniak is a big fan and so is Nick. Darran has bought it for £3 on your recommendation, so maybe we'll write an article and feature it in the magazine at a later date.

PC FOREVER

Dearest **Retro Gamer**,
I loved your article a few issues back about gaming in the Nineties. I agree it was a golden decade for gaming and I was surprised to see PC gaming covered in the feature as your magazine seems to favour consoles. PC gaming was massive before Windows 95 and Direct X, even with all the DOS SHELL and autoexec.bat joys.

Yes, piracy was a big problem for developers, but if you favoured games such as flight simulators, war games, strategy games and RPGs the PC was perfect.

Is it possible to include PC games in the Noughties charts?
Chris Barry

Glad you enjoyed the article, Chris, it was great fun putting it all together – the memories! We're covering plenty of PC stuff in the mag, so keep an eye out for it. We do feature the PC chart in Back To The Noughties, but we alternate it with other systems.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

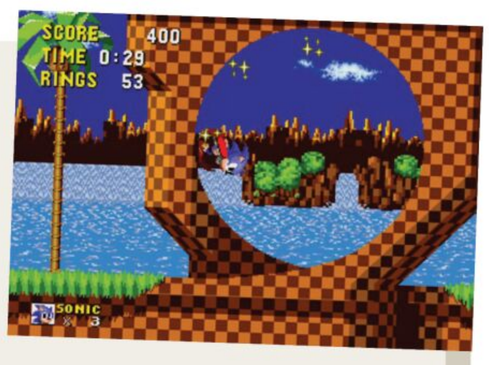
Sega goodness

Darran and Nick have been hankering for Sega recently. Darran has been revisiting his Saturn collection and crying at the cost of some of the games he is after, while Nick has dived into the Dreamcast and has been streaming everything from *Sonic Adventure* to *Power Stone*. You can watch him at www.twitch.tv/hkt3030.

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know…

What's your favourite Sonic memory?



Ben Magnet
Seeing the opening video for *Sonic CD*. I was about six years old when my parents got me the game for our PC and I had no clue games could do stuff like that. The song was awesome, it got me hyped, and I played that game for as long as I could.

Craig Fawcett
Hearing the music for Green Hill Zone for the very first time was something else. It still brings a smile to my face, and I'm 40 now!

Carl Traill
Back in 1993 my parents got me a Mega Drive 2 with a handful of games and one of them was *Sonic 2*. We would play the two-player versions of the Special Stage and the Casino Night Zone over and over again.

Gavin Brumwell
Playing *Sonic The Hedgehog* for the very first time. The speed, colours and sounds blew my seven-year-old mind.

Yas
Going to Blockbuster on Friday night and renting *Sonic 3* only to get stuck on the red barrel on Carnival Night Zone. Good times.

Sam Ogonovsky
I grew up playing *Sonic Classic Collection* on the DS, so when I beat *Sonic 2* on an actual Mega Drive for the first time last year, that was something special.

Philip Masterson
The underwater bits when he breathes in a big air bubble… It used to scare me when he was close to drowning.

Rob P
Defeating Dr Robotnik in Green Hill Zone for the first time the day after a family wedding.

Glen De Vall
My three-year-old kid seeing the original *Sonic* for the first time and it becoming his favourite thing. From one generation to the next.

Travis Prebble
Oddly, seeing Sonic's idle animation for the first time and having this speedy hedgehog growing impatient with my inaction.

John Maguire
Watching the new movie in the cinema with my kids. They loved it, so we came home, set up the Mega Drive and played *Sonic 2*.

Dave Tucker
When he finally buried the hatchet with Mario and challenged him to the Olympics.

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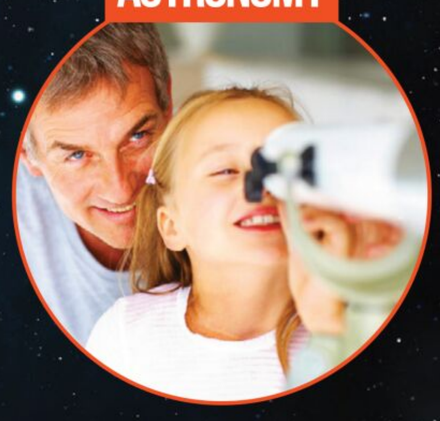

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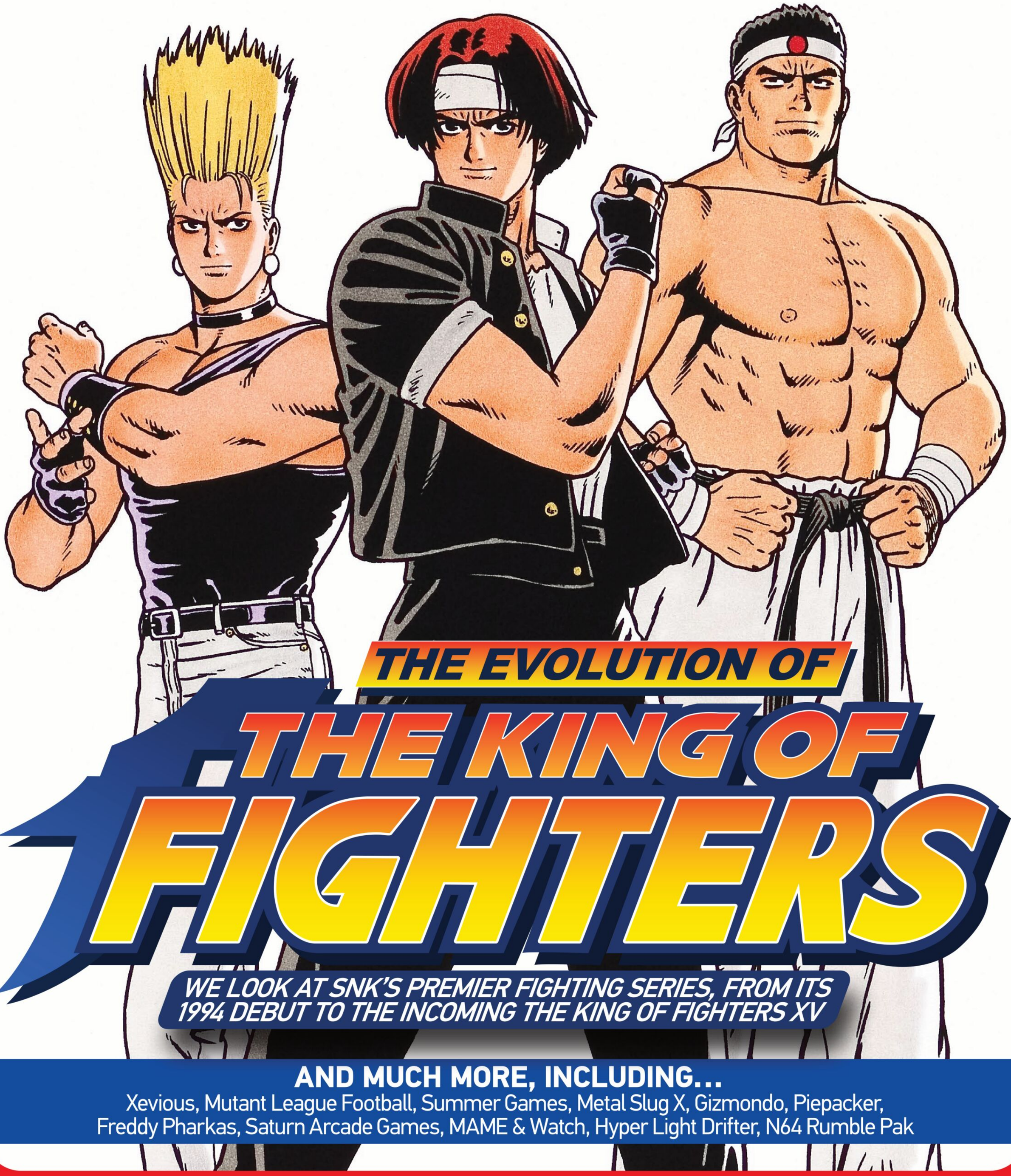


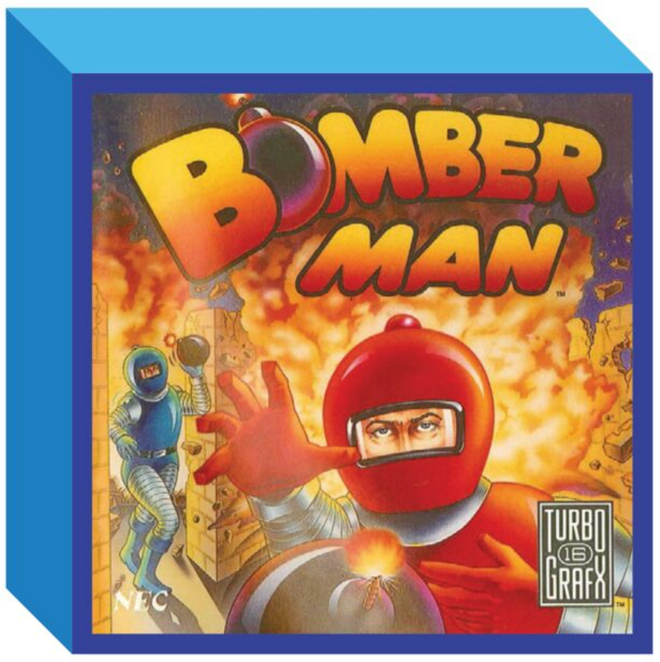
THE EVOLUTION OF THE KING OF FIGHTERS

WE LOOK AT SNK'S PREMIER FIGHTING SERIES, FROM ITS 1994 DEBUT TO THE INCOMING THE KING OF FIGHTERS XV

AND MUCH MORE, INCLUDING...

Xevious, Mutant League Football, Summer Games, Metal Slug X, Gizmondo, Piepacker, Freddy Pharkas, Saturn Arcade Games, MAME & Watch, Hyper Light Drifter, N64 Rumble Pak

ENDGAME



BOMBERMAN

» Lisa's been kidnapped, and it's up to Bomberman to save her! Why? Because Dr Mitsumori doesn't really fancy going to fight Black Bomberman himself, and would much rather send his prized invention. Fortunately, Bomberman is a robot and doesn't have to think too hard about that. Does he succeed in his task? As you've probably guessed, the answer is yes – so let's see what happens when he does.

01

» Our villain is doing a runner, and he's actually keeping well ahead of the heroic Bomberman. That's the rule of villainy, you see – you're always able to be as fast as you need to evade capture. Even Robotnik has that power.

02

» With all the fighting going on, Lisa has decided to rescue herself rather than waiting for some hero, though she does make her way straight for Bomberman once he arrives on the scene. He is a dashing kind of robot.

03

» Black Bomberman has not only been thoroughly defeated by his older counterpart, he's been careless enough to leave his hostage unattended. His dream is dead. Realising this, he falls to his knees and begins to weep openly.

04

» Outside the castle, Bomberman escorts Lisa to her dad. Dr Mitsumori is overjoyed to see her, and probably pretty happy to see the success of his plan to send a robot to do his dirty work. What a courageous, loving father he truly is – we aspire to be like him. And you should too.

05

» Of course, when you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. So Bomberman couldn't help but leave some bombs scattered around Black Bomberman's castle, blowing it up and probably murdering his younger brother in the process. It's a good job he's an emotionless robot, really.

THE MINI

SONIC

THE HEDGEHOG

COMPANION

OVER THE PAGE...

40 GAMES INSIDE

retro GAMER

THE MINI SONIC THE HEDGEHOG COMPANION

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO SEGA'S SPIKY MASCOT

JUST KEEP SPINNING

Sega's speedy mascot has come a long way in the last 30 years. After making his debut as an ornament hanging from a rearview mirror in *Rad Mobile*, he found immediate success on the Mega Drive and Master System. Sega quickly realised the strength of its new character, and pushed him aggressively as a result, and when the wind changes you can sometimes still hear the uncontrollable sobs of the publisher's previous mascot, Alex Kidd, as he laments what might have been if Sonic had never shown up.

But Sonic did show up and his spunky attitude and high-speed platforming struck a chord with gamers around the world and he soon became instrumental in Sega's very public battle against Nintendo and its popular plumber, Mario. He was versatile too, appearing in all manner of media and merchandise from lunchboxes and magazines, to more recently, a surprisingly fun movie.

What's particularly interesting about Sonic is that while his later 3D adventures haven't always resonated well with fans, the strength of his early 8-bit and 16-bit games are so strong that a groundswell of excitement still appears whenever a new game is announced, even when it ends up being *Sonic Forces*. Sonic often feels unstoppable, despite the many highs and lows he's faced over the last 30 years. So join us as we strap on our red shoes and make a hasty run through Sonic's best and most interesting games.

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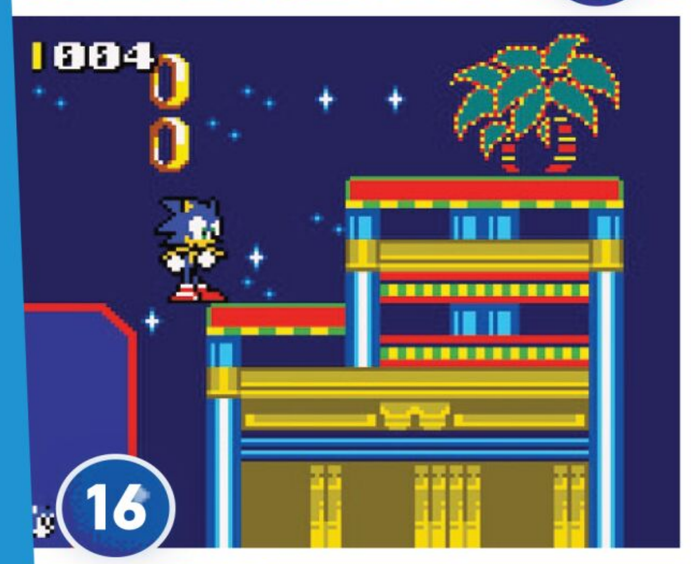

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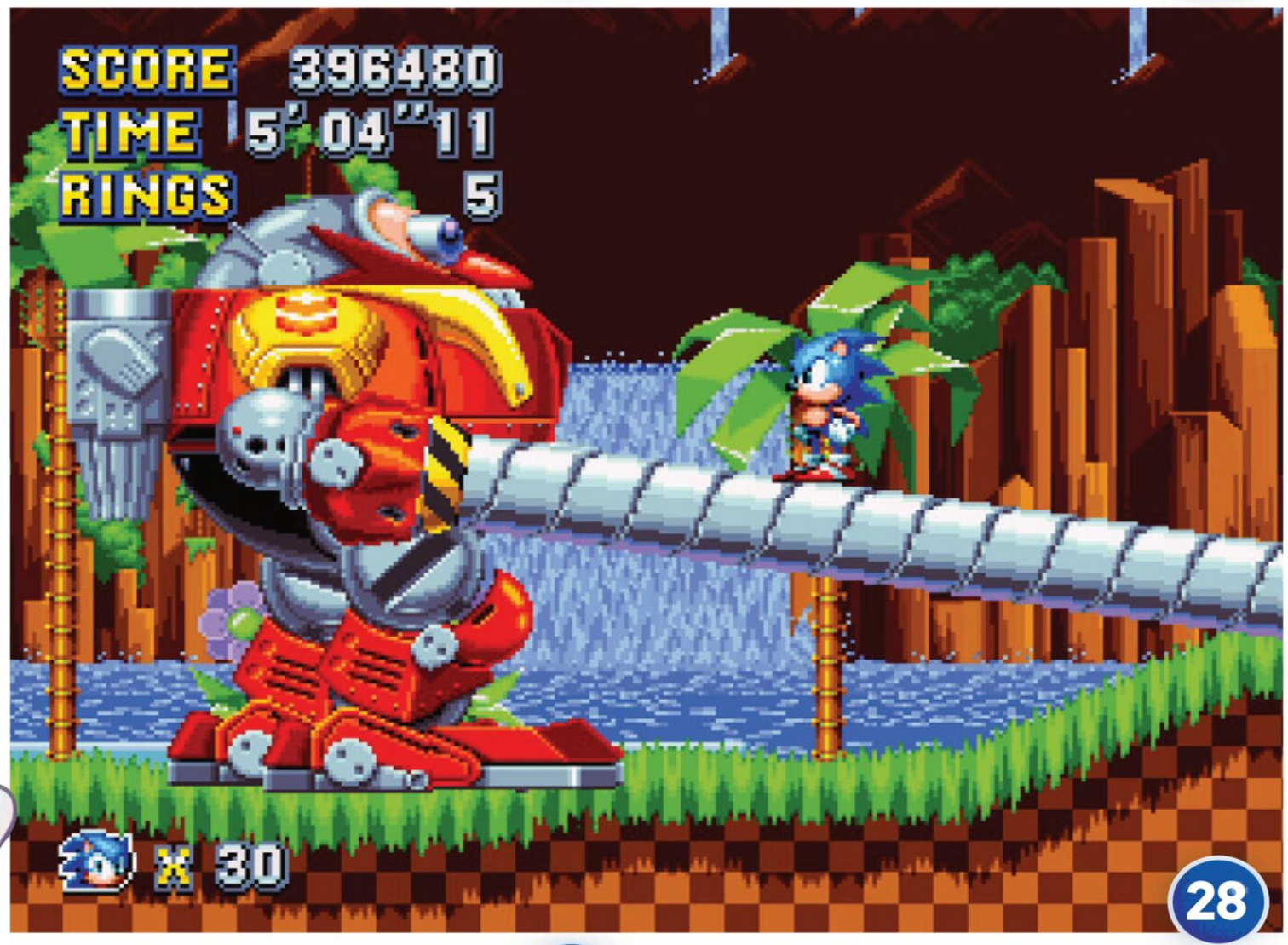


SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

MEGA DRIVE, 1991

Sonic burst onto the scene with speed and attitude, and the only thing that time has taken from his debut is impact. But even though every gamer is now familiar with the rolling hills and loops of the Green Hill Zone, the experience remains compelling because speed is very much a privilege in this game, and you can see the effects of your improved skills and memorised routes in the form of increasingly smooth runs. Having said that, the game is also marked by some of the slowest classic stages, with the deliberate pace of Marble Zone and Labyrinth Zone contrasting with Sonic's trademark speed. Success will send you to the game's impressive rotating special stages, but even when you fail, there's some fun to be had in recapturing the rings that you dropped in a spectacular shower. Sonic's first outing is an easy game that lacks some now-standard series features, but it's unquestionably a landmark in the platform genre.

» [Mega Drive] Released on 23 June 1991, *Sonic* sold 2 million cartridges globally by the year's end.

» [Master System] During the early stages of Sonic's development designers toyed with the idea of making him an armadillo.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

MASTER SYSTEM/GAME GEAR, 1991

Yuzo Koshiro's studio Ancient was founded to take on the task of bringing Sonic to Sega's 8-bit consoles, and it did a very good job. Rather than trying to produce a cut-down version of the Mega Drive original, Ancient's adaptation offered some of the iconic locations of the original and added new stage concepts including Bridge Zone and Sky Base Zone. With less speed and a total lack of fancy loops, the team instead provided variation by throwing in the odd vertical or auto-scrolling stage, and even some puzzle-oriented stages later on. The game also encouraged players to explore stages and take risks by hiding the Chaos Emeralds in tricky parts of regular stages, with bonus stages instead offering up extra lives and continues. While they can't match the Mega Drive game for spectacle, the Master System and Game Gear versions of *Sonic The Hedgehog* are very good and actually offer a tougher challenge than the 16-bit game.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

MASTER SYSTEM/GAME GEAR, 1992

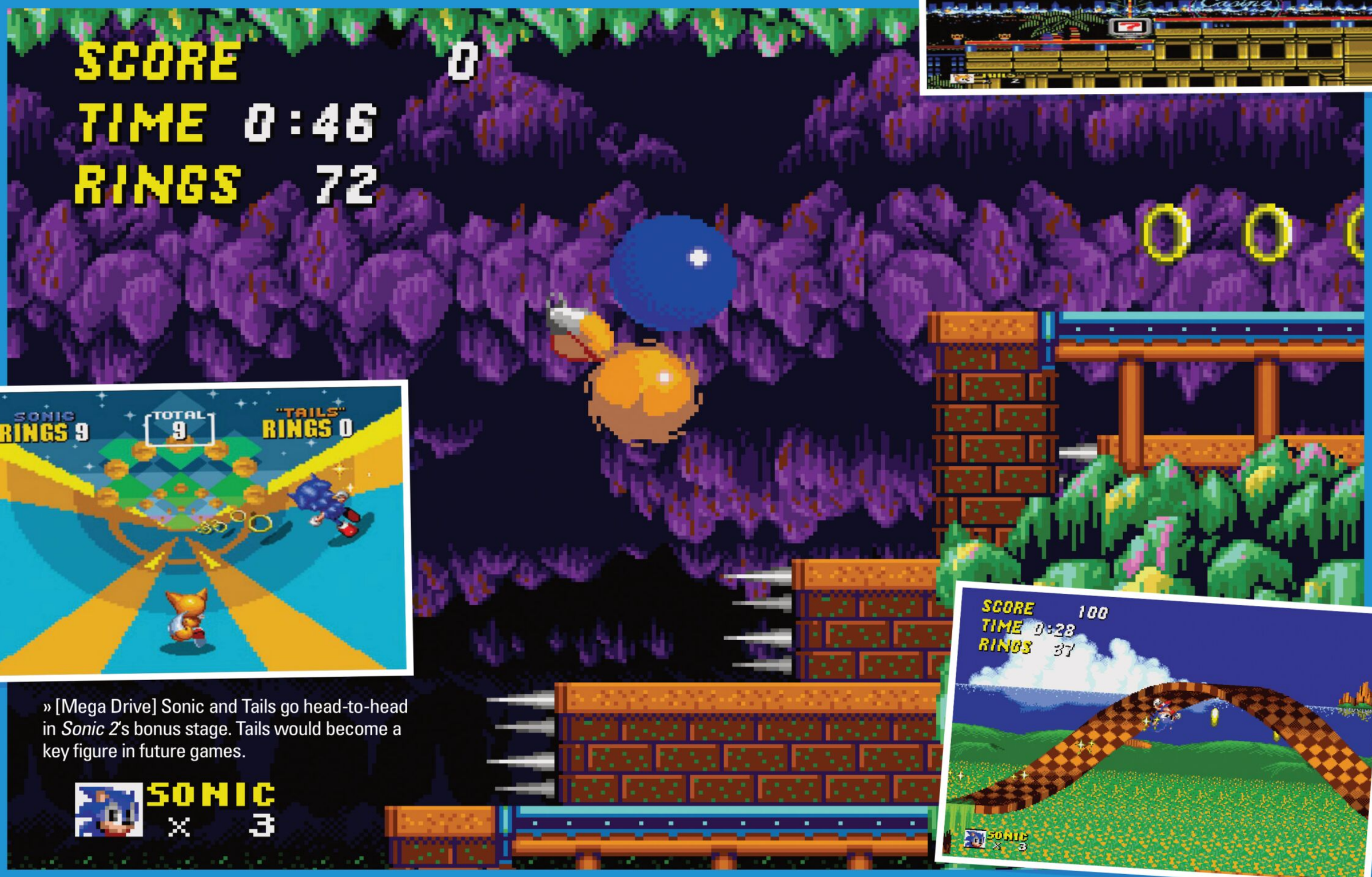
The development studio Aspect was given the job of creating the 8-bit versions of *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, and right from the start it planned a wholly different game to the Mega Drive version. This time out, Sonic's goal is to rescue Tails, who has been kidnapped by the nefarious Dr Eggman (or Robotnik, if you're old school). The game managed to incorporate the series' signature loops into stages and also introduced vehicles to the series, including mine carts and hang-gliders. It's also the first time that Eggman takes a back seat, instead sending a variety of animal-themed robots into battle for boss encounters. The 8-bit versions of *Sonic 2* are very good, but they're also representative of *Sonic* games at their absolute hardest – particularly in the Game Gear version, where the reduced screen size causes difficulties right from the first boss. You'll also need to collect all the Chaos Emeralds to see the final stage, no matter which version you're playing.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 2

MEGA DRIVE, 1992

Produced in the USA by a mixed team of Japanese and American staff, *Sonic 2* had a troubled development phase that resulted in an unusually high number of abandoned concepts. However, none of that was evident when the game launched to incredible fanfare in November 1992 (Sega even went so far as to call the launch Sonic 2sday). Emphasising the strong points of the original Mega Drive classic, *Sonic 2* included a greater number of stages and lifted Sonic's speed cap considerably. It also introduced a number of recurring elements in the series, including the invincible Super Sonic, the instant acceleration Spin Dash technique and the first of Sonic's many friends, Miles "Tails" Prower. As well as following Sonic around stages and ruining your chances of beating the special stages, the cute flying fox competed against Sonic in the split-screen multiplayer mode. Needless to say it was another smash hit and managed to sell 5 million copies in its first 60 days on sale.

» Hailed for its gorgeous visuals and superb gameplay, *Sonic 2* was also criticised for its difficulty.



» [Mega Drive] Sonic and Tails go head-to-head in *Sonic 2*'s bonus stage. Tails would become a key figure in future games.

Q&A: CREATING A SONIC BEATER

Mark Cerny on making that difficult second album

What pressures did *Sonic 2*'s short deadline create?

If I recall properly, the first game took 14 months. To try to create the sequel in nine months – with a culturally divided team – was really stressful.

Given the commercial importance of a sequel, did upper management take an unusual interest in the project? If so, how?

Sega Technical Institute had been set up as an independent studio; it was not located with any other Sega offices. My rationale was simply that I'd seen the growing pains that the US organisation had been going through and wanted to make sure that STI was isolated from them.

This isolation was very good from a creative perspective and meant we didn't have much external pressure – but it also meant we couldn't expect much support when challenges (such as creating a high-quality sequel in nine months) arose.

What were the key things that you and the team wanted to improve over the original Mega Drive game?

We knew we needed a flashy bonus stage and ended up creating a pseudo-3D dash down a half pipe. Certainly, it was visually exciting, though I never could shake my feeling that the gameplay had been deeper in the rotating bonus stage in the first game.

We knew we needed more than that, though! Naka-san pulled off some technical magic and created a split-screen racing mode that turned out extremely well. And the team added another character: Tails.

Which achievements are you most proud of with *Sonic 2*?

I'm very proud that the *Sonic* series continued without a hitch, despite Naka-san's departure from Sega headquarters. Had I not intervened, I'm pretty sure that there still would have been a *Sonic 2*, and that it would have been helmed by Naka-san – but I think it would have taken years for him to fall back into Sega's orbit. Certainly there would not have been annual releases of *Sonic* titles, and the players and the brand would have lost out!

FACTOR FIVE

Cool facts about Sonic's best mate

A FURRY TALE

Tails is so named because of his distinctive two tails. He was mercilessly bullied as a child because of his unique attribute.

MASTERING THE FOX

Tails' first appearance in a videogame is the Master System version of *Sonic 2* by Aspect, which arrived just before the Mega Drive version.

BUDDIES FOR LIFE

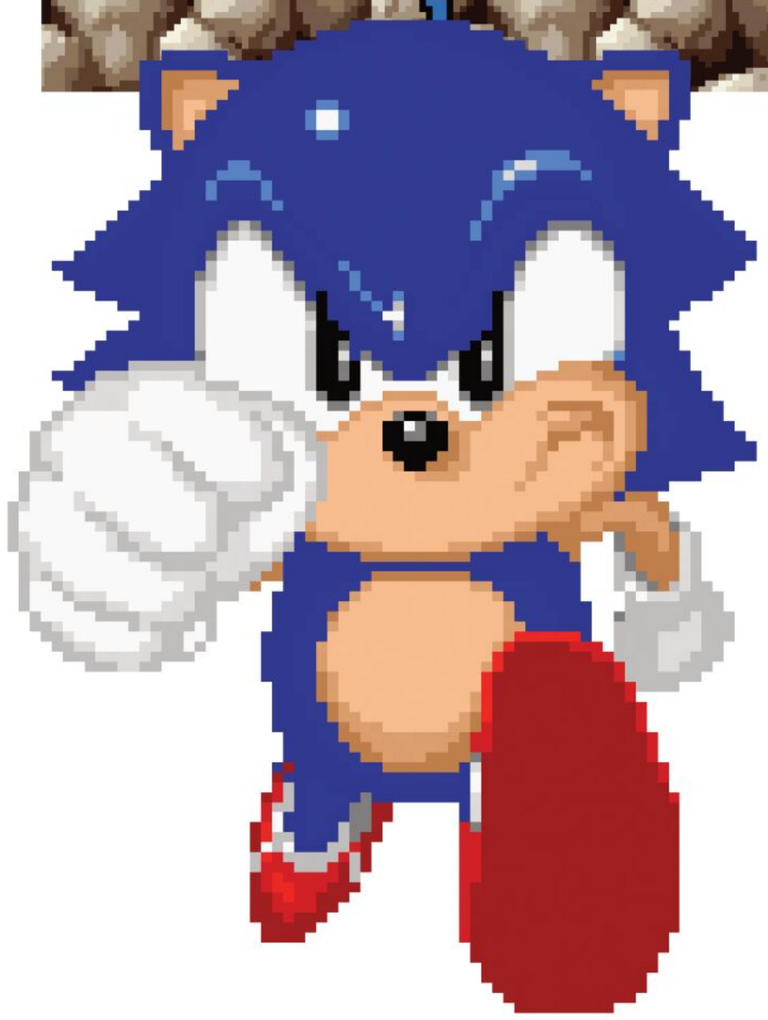
Sonic is Tails' best friend and the little fox has sacrificed himself to save Sonic on a number of occasions.

FINDING A VOICE

Tails has been voiced by six English-speaking actors, including Corey Bringas, Amy Palant and Colleen O'Shaughnessey, who still does his voice today.

TAKING CHARGE

Tails has taken the lead in several videogames, including *Tails And The Music Maker* for Sega Pico and *Tails' Adventure* and *Tails' Skypatrol* for Game Gear.



SEGA SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

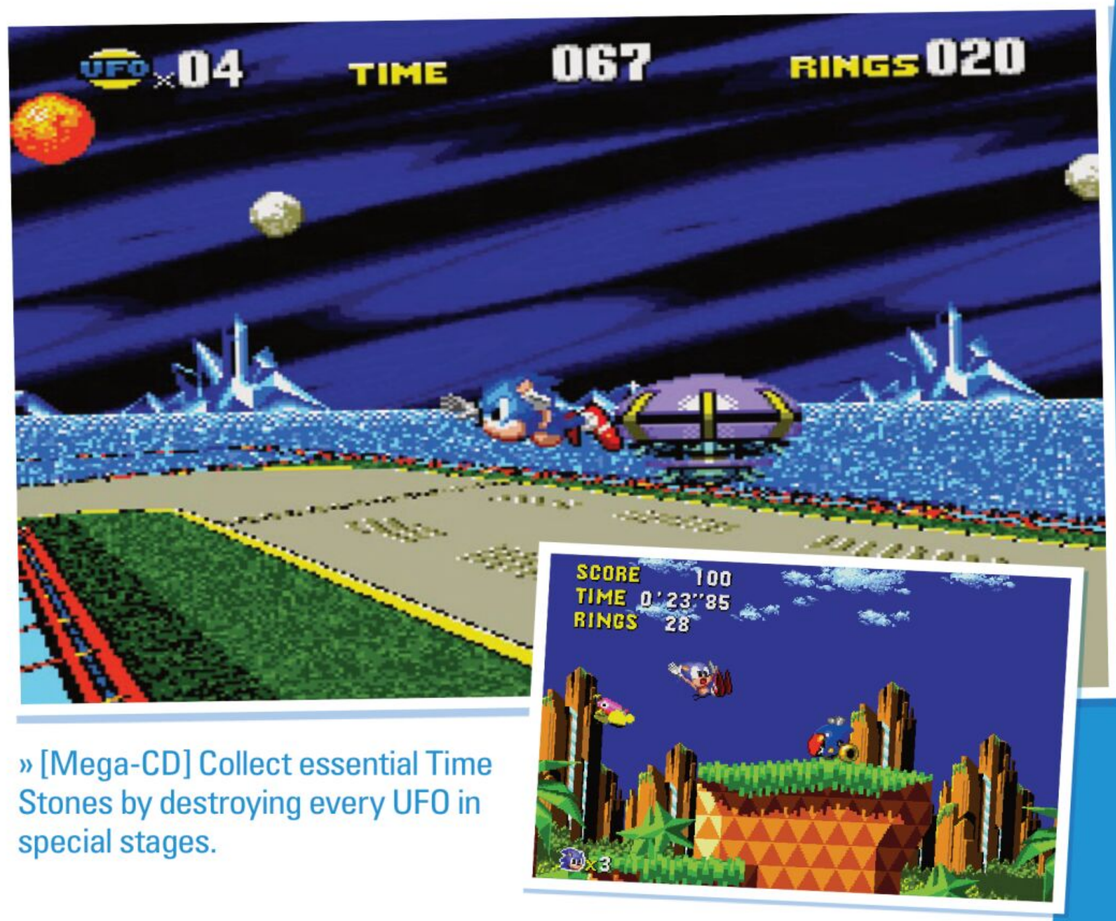
ARCADE, 1993

For Sonic's arcade debut, Sega took the unusual step of removing him from his usual side-scrolling environment and sticking him in a trackball-controlled isometric platformer. Sonic gained some new mates in Mighty and Ray, who joined in for three-player action. While this game has been sighted in the UK and elsewhere, it isn't known to have been officially released outside of Japan – an odd move, considering the massive global popularity of the character at the time. Shockingly, it's never had a home release.

SONIC CD

MEGA-CD/PC, 1993

Sonic's only outing on Sega's expensive add-on was an unusual affair, with character designer Naoto Ohshima taking over as game director. Sonic was able to travel back and forth in time during each stage in an attempt to fix the future, experiencing different level layouts as a result. This necessitated a different style of stage design compared to his other 2D platformers, as he is expected to backtrack often and explore each stage thoroughly. It's topped off by an impressive 3D-style special stage and a CD soundtrack.



» [Mega-CD] Collect essential Time Stones by destroying every UFO in special stages.

SONIC CHAOS

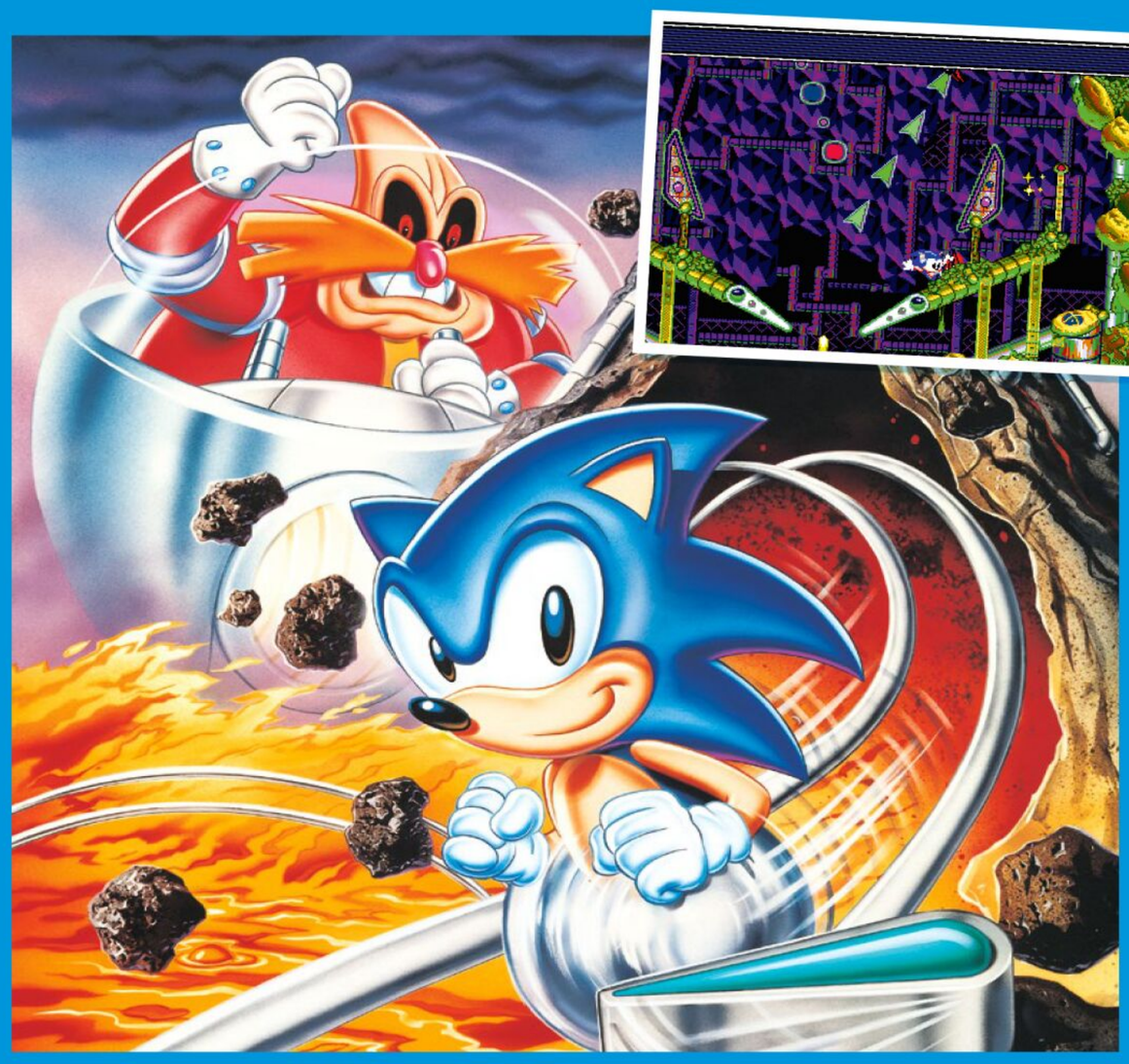
MASTER SYSTEM/GAME GEAR, 1993

Having done a good job with the 8-bit version of *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, its developer Aspect was tasked with creating an exclusive platformer for Sega's low-end formats and the final game isn't bad at all. *Sonic Chaos* introduces a playable Tails to the 8-bit consoles and gives Sonic some nifty power-ups including spring shoes and rocket shoes, but exhibits an uneven difficulty level and slow framerate, with regular stages being far too easy and special stages often rather tough. It certainly has its fans, though.

SONIC SPINBALL

VARIOUS, 1993

This was the first of Sonic's major spin-off outings, released to cover the lack of a Mega Drive platformer for the 1993 holiday season. Inspired by the pinball action of *Sonic 2*'s enjoyable Casino Night Zone, the game expanded on the pinball formula with large multi-table environments and boss battles. Although it only contains four stages, they're relatively tough to complete. *Sonic Spinball* is a perfectly serviceable game, but nothing incredible. It showed up nearly a decade later on Nintendo's Game Boy Advance.



» [Game Gear] Sonic and Tails are the two playable characters, with Knuckles showing up as a boss fight.

SONIC TRIPLE TROUBLE

GAME GEAR, 1994

If you're looking for a solid *Sonic* platformer on Sega's handheld you can't go wrong with Aspect's sequel to *Sonic Chaos*. It has Sonic and Tails facing off against Knuckles, but they receive additional hassle from a weasel treasure hunter called Nack. It's arguably one of the nicest-looking *Sonic* games on the console and has some great level design across its six areas. It's not the most inventive game in the series, but if you're looking for some entertaining platforming you can't really go wrong.

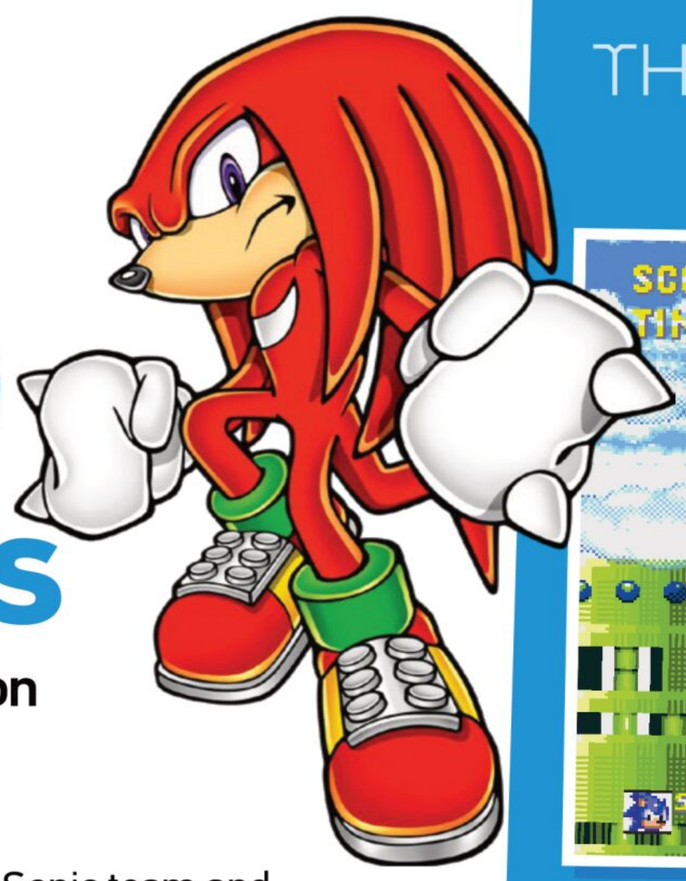
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3 & KNUCKLES

MEGA DRIVE, 1994

Another game, another new character – and this time it's a foe in the form of Knuckles, a hot-tempered echidna. Beyond that, Sega Technical Institute's game plays it relatively safe, although bosses now appear at the end of all stages. The inclusion of a save game feature was criticised for making the game too easy, especially given its relatively short length, but it's another high-quality platform game.

Released just eight months after *Sonic 3*, *Sonic & Knuckles* sees the two titular rivals joining forces, as Knuckles realises that Robotnik is a tad evil and joins the playable cast. The game's cartridge includes another cartridge slot, allowing players to plug other games into the top. Plugging in *Sonic 2* makes Knuckles available in the older game, but connecting to *Sonic 3* is the far more enticing prospect as *Sonic & Knuckles* is essentially the second part of that game. Combined, they become one large adventure that stands as the best 2D outing for Sega's mascot.

» [Mega Drive] *Sonic 3* features the debut of Sonic's hot-headed rival Knuckles, who becomes playable in *Sonic & Knuckles*.



CREATING SONIC 3 & KNUCKLES

Roger Hector on working on the acclaimed game

Roger's role

My job was to interface between the Sonic team and the rest of the company. I had to keep the rest of the company from interfering with or bothering the team, and keep the team on track. I had to make sure they had what they needed, and if they had problems, I had to solve them. This included everything from scheduling and resources to giving creative input and resolving personal disputes.

The language barrier

Most of the Japanese team spoke some English. Those that were more fluent did translation for the others. There were some additional Sega Of Japan management staff that came in and helped with communications at big meetings. We also brought in an outside language teacher and conducted a regular Berlitz class in Japanese.

Splitting the game and lock-on technology

There were so many creative ideas that it would take too much time to develop such a massive project. The team brainstormed up two games' worth of material initially and it was decided, before the Alpha stage I think, that it would make more sense to split it into two games. It was a tricky technical piece of work, but these guys were some of the best in the industry and it came off pretty smoothly.

Discussing the soundtrack

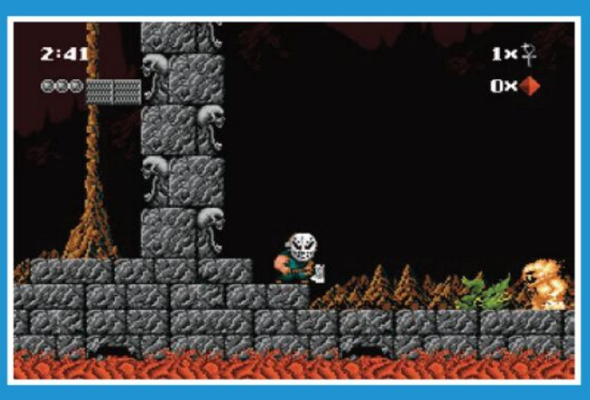
Michael Jackson was a very big fan of Sonic and he wanted to record a soundtrack for the game. He came to STI and met with the team to discuss the design theme, story, and feel of the game. He then went away and recorded an entire soundtrack that covered all of the worlds. It was fantastic [...] We had it all ready and integrated into the game when the first news stories came out accusing him of child molestation, and Sega had to back away from this collaboration. It was very late in the development process, and we had to quickly put together a complete replacement music track.

TECHNICALLY ACCOMPLISHED

More gaming gems from Sega Technical Institute

KID CHAMELEON

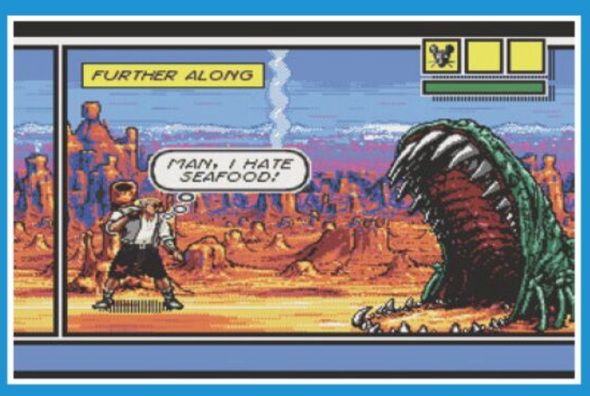
MEGA DRIVE, 1992



■ While it lacks the flair of the studio's later *Sonic* releases, this interesting early platformer is well worth revisiting today. While the platforming itself is fairly conventional, Kid's ability to utilise different skills by donning a variety of masks certainly manages to keep things interesting.

COMIX ZONE

MEGA DRIVE, 1995



■ Sketch Turner gets sucked into the comic he's creating and must battle his way out in STI's impressive-looking Mega Drive game. The combat is a little clunky at times, but it's full of inventive touches like punching enemies through panels, and it looks absolutely fantastic.

SONIC X-TREME

SATURN, UNRELEASED

■ This troubled project was the last game the team worked on before being disbanded. Initially planned for the 32X, it then moved to Saturn and PC but went through development hell and never had an official release. Despite a playable E3 demo in 1996, the project stalled and was eventually cancelled.

SONIC DRIFT 2

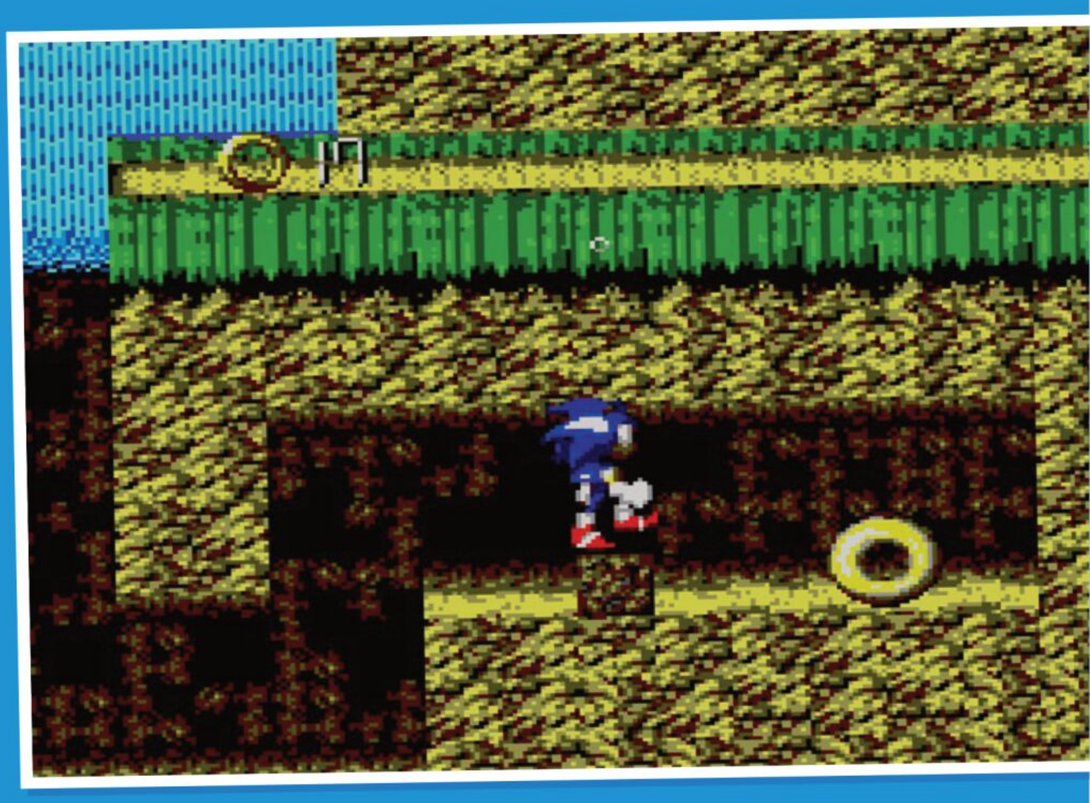
GAME GEAR, 1995

The first *Sonic Drift* was a racing spin-off only released in Japan, but the sequel managed to gain a worldwide release. Compared to the first game, this is clearly superior, with three additional characters, plenty of new tracks and more challenging enemy racers. It's tempting, as a racing game with power-ups, to compare it to *Mario Kart*. However, it feels far closer to 8-bit conversions of *Out Run* and *Super Monaco GP* due to the limitations of the platform, and it compares well to those games.

SONIC BLAST

MASTER SYSTEM/GAME GEAR, 1996

Sonic's farewell to the world of 8-bit gaming was a surprisingly ambitious one, with Aspect choosing to employ pre-rendered sprites to represent Sonic and Knuckles. Unfortunately, to make that choice worthwhile, those sprites have to be quite large and you don't get to see much of the stage at a time. This makes it tough to avoid obstacles, which may be why hits cost you just ten rings rather than all of them as is traditional. The Brazil-only Master System version is now a real rarity.



SONIC CHAMPIONSHIP

ARCADE, 1996

Sega's legendary AM2 team took the helm for this arcade release, which along with *Virtua Fighter Kids* represented a drive to make fighting games more appealing to young players. Based on the *Fighting Vipers* engine, it's a fun and frantic if slightly shallow fighter. New characters include Bark, a polar bear, and Bean, a bomb-throwing duck whose design harks back to Sega's cutesy beat-'em-up *Dynamite Dux*. A Sonic-style version of *Fighting Vipers*' Honey was also designed but dropped, finally appearing in the game's PSN/XBLA release.

SONIC 3D: FLICKIES' ISLAND

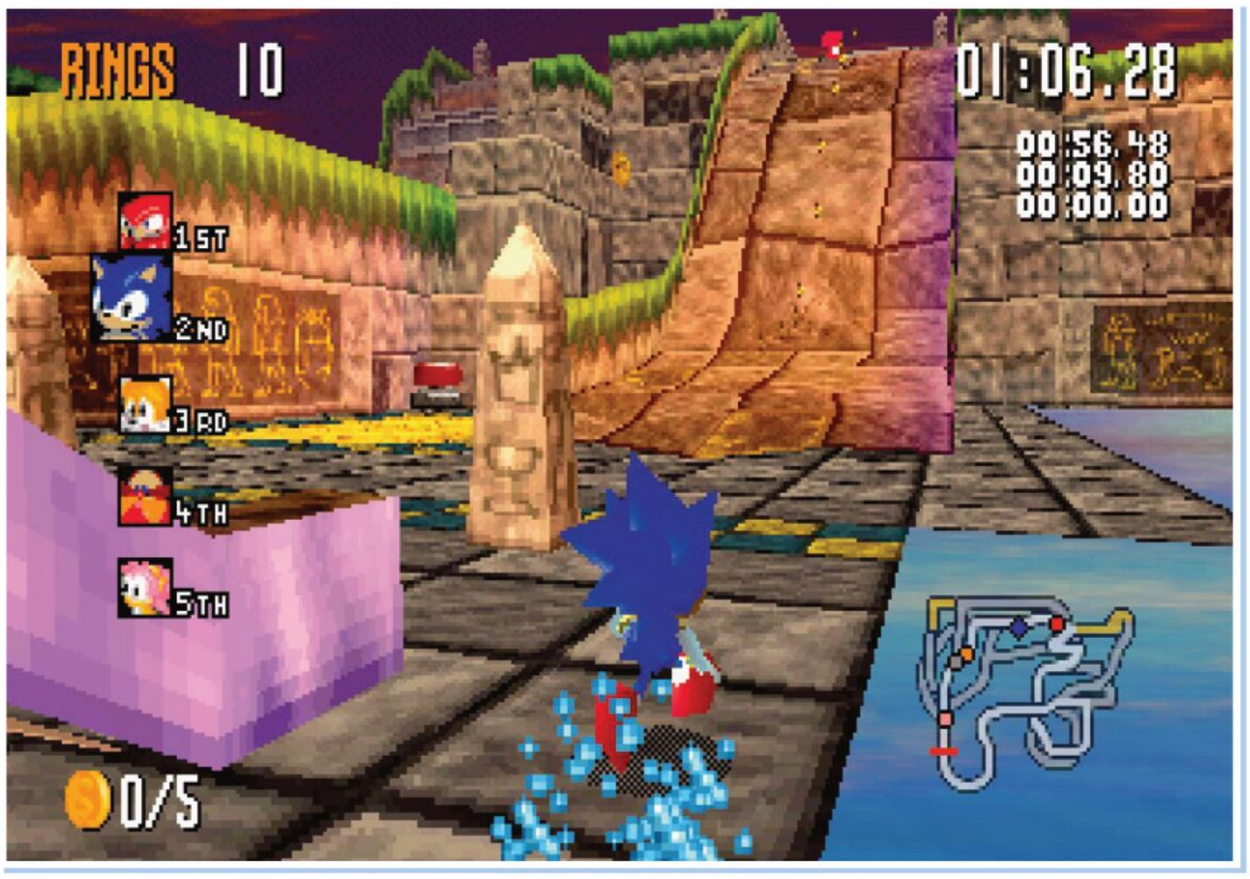
MEGA DRIVE/SATURN, 1996

Sonic's Mega Drive swansong was an isometric platformer developed by Traveller's Tales that employed pre-rendered CGI sprites – a style that had been popularised by Nintendo's *Donkey Kong Country* a couple of years prior. Sonic was tasked with rescuing Flickies and leading them to various exits, a gameplay mechanic borrowed from Sega's 1984 arcade release *Flicky*. The Saturn release was a late replacement for the cancelled *Sonic X-Treme* and sports improved visuals as well as a brand-new polygonal special stage designed by Sonic Team.

SONIC R

SATURN/PC, 1997

Traveller's Tales returned for the Saturn's only exclusive *Sonic* game, an on-foot racing spin-off. The game's five tracks each have a large number of shortcuts and alternative routes off the main track, and you'll need to explore them all in order to find the hidden items that allow you to unlock additional characters. *Sonic R* doesn't last long but it's a technical showcase for the Saturn, displaying graphical tricks like transparency that had been thought impossible on the hardware, and the soundtrack is utterly unforgettable.



SONIC ADVENTURE

DREAMCAST, 1998

Originally planned as a Saturn game, *Sonic Adventure*'s development switched to the Dreamcast as the fading fortunes of Sega's black box became apparent. Sonic's first 3D platform game is the first to prominently feature his friends – all six characters have different play styles ranging from item-hunting to fishing, and their stories must be played to reach the game's true ending, meaning it offers plenty of replay value. The game also added the popular Chao-raising minigame, in which players could raise a virtual pet on the Dreamcast and via the system's Visual Memory handheld console/memory card hybrid. While *Sonic Adventure* was well received at the time, selling over a million copies and later earning a GameCube port, playing it today reveals a wayward camera and some rather linear stage designs. Despite these issues, it still manages to deliver plenty of thrilling moments and managed to keep and build on the early mechanics that the series was known for.

GOING 3D

Kazuyuki Hoshino revisits Sonic's first 3D adventure

What was the most difficult thing about bringing classic character designs from 2D to 3D?

Character posing in 2D can be very easily faked to look cool, but there are a lot of instances where you try and represent the same pose with a 3D model and it really can't be reproduced. Another example would be Sonic crossing his arms. That was so difficult. The new Sonic design had longer arms and legs, but one could say the bigger solution to the problem was the ability to pose the character where everything looked good from a variety of angles.

Chaos was an impressive enemy in 1998, thanks to its transparent body and unusual attacks. What inspired its design?

One of the key benchmarks for quality videogame graphics is the representation of water. No matter what hardware generation you are developing games on, we have been working on techniques for representing water, and are always looking at how other companies and other teams are representing water in the games they make. We thought Chaos, who is a strong, yet fluid and beautiful representation of water, would really be a perfect symbol for the game on this new hardware. So, we took up the design challenge.

Why do you think Sonic fans still hold the original *Sonic Adventure* in such high regard?

If I think of what the appeal of the title is, as a fan myself, I would have to say it is because each of the characters has such a deep story. The story continues still to this day and seems to be expanding instead of coming to an end. For example, one could probably still think "I bet Big is probably fishing right now." In addition, I'm sure there is also the expectation that someday in the future we would make a sequel or continuation in the series.

ENHANCING SONIC'S ADVENTURE

The later releases of Sega's Dreamcast game

SONIC ADVENTURE DX

After bowing out of making consoles, Sega revealed it would start putting its games on other systems and *Sonic Adventure* was an obvious choice. In addition to featuring better detailed character models, *Sonic Adventure DX* also has a redesigned Chao-raising game as well as connectivity with the Game Boy Advance and a number of new missions to take part in. It also aims for 60 frames per second, but doesn't always hit it consistently.

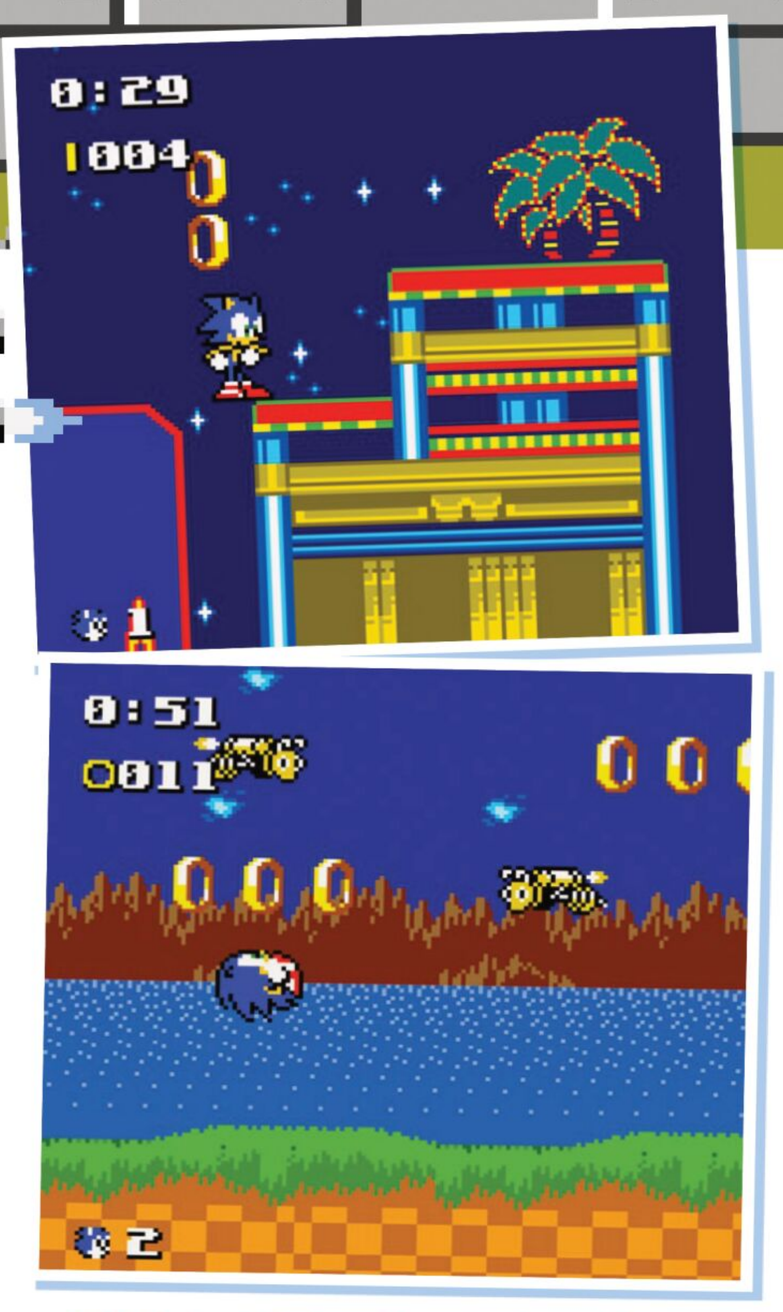
SONIC ADVENTURE HD

You can't keep a good hedgehog down and *Sonic Adventure* was released again, this time for the Xbox 360 and PS3 in 2010, with a PC version following in 2011. Unfortunately it's something of a lazy port and appears to have had little effort put into updating it for HD consoles. Even more cheekily, the numerous extras that featured in the earlier *DX* version have been stripped out so they could be sold as DLC.

SONIC POCKET ADVENTURE

NEO GEO POCKET COLOR, 1999

While this game wasn't the blue hedgehog's first appearance on a non-Sega console – the atrocious Tiger Game.com version of *Sonic Jam* takes that title, unfortunately – *Sonic Pocket Adventure* is an excellent 'greatest hits' remix of the Mega Drive games, incorporating brand-new level layouts with the visual style of *Sonic 2* and the musical compositions of *Sonic 3 & Knuckles*. The game includes hidden puzzle pieces in every stage, encouraging exploration and repeat play, as well as a race mode for link cable owners.



» [NGPC] *Sonic Pocket Adventure* boasted a save feature that enable players to replay levels.

OW! THE EDGE

A brief history of Shadow The Hedgehog

■ Shadow was created as the result of a dark pact between Dr Gerald Robotnik and Black Doom, the leader of the Black Arms aliens, with the goal of curing the terminally ill Maria Robotnik.

■ Shadow's disdain for humanity and initial villainy come from his memories of GUN soldiers invading the ARK space colony and fatally shooting Maria Robotnik, while he was helpless in an escape pod.

■ Although Shadow appears to die at the end of *Sonic Adventure 2*, his popularity saw him return in the very next game, *Sonic Heroes* – though a legion of Shadow robots muddied the waters as to his real identity.

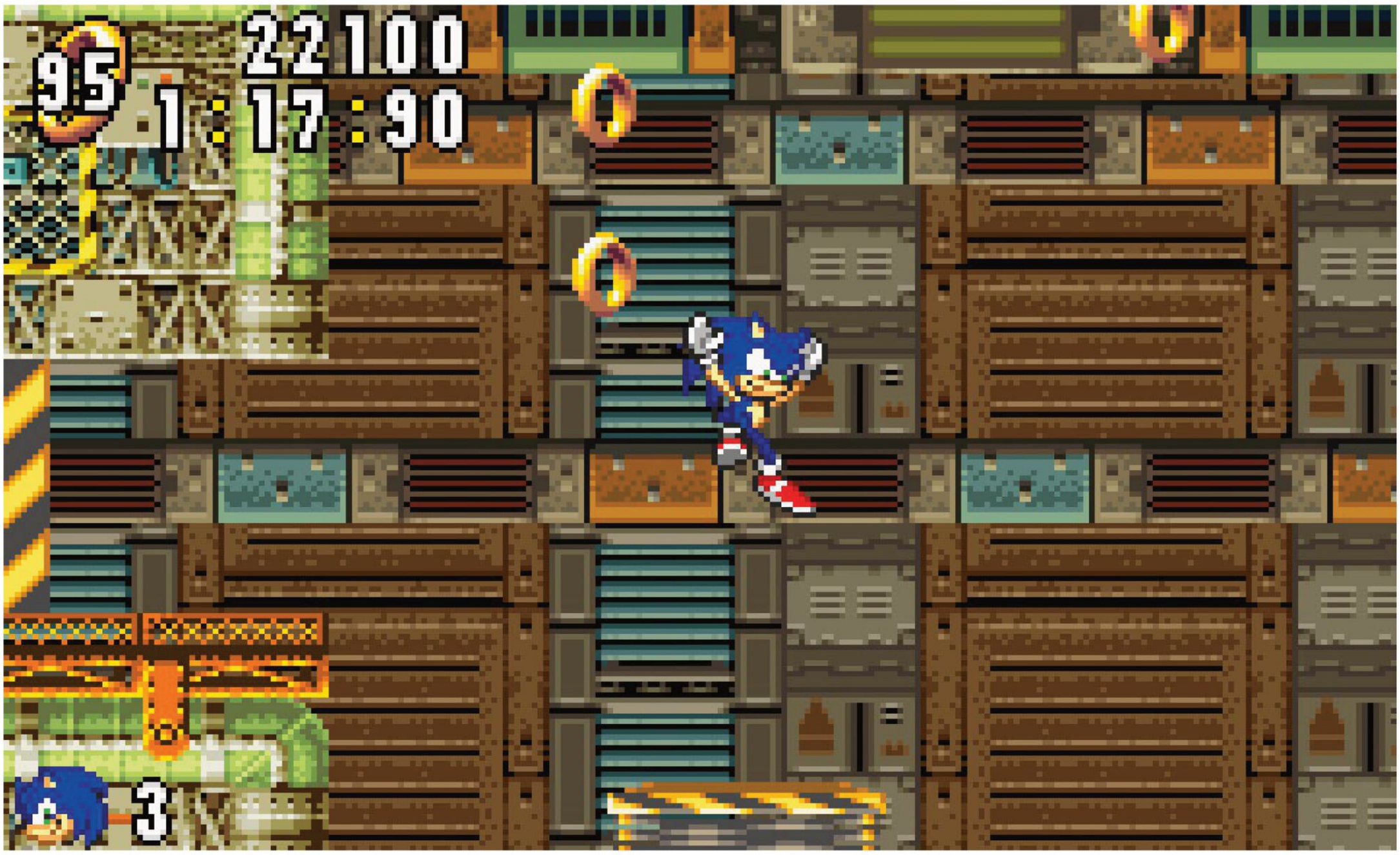
■ In his own spin-off game *Shadow The Hedgehog*, the Black Arms invade Earth and promise to restore Shadow's memories in return for his aid – but he can opt to fight against them instead.

■ Shadow returns in *Sonic The Hedgehog* (2006) as a main character alongside Sonic and Silver. As an agent of GUN, he can use the kinds of weapons and vehicles that he first got in his own game.

SONIC ADVENTURE 2

DREAMCAST/GAMECUBE, 2001

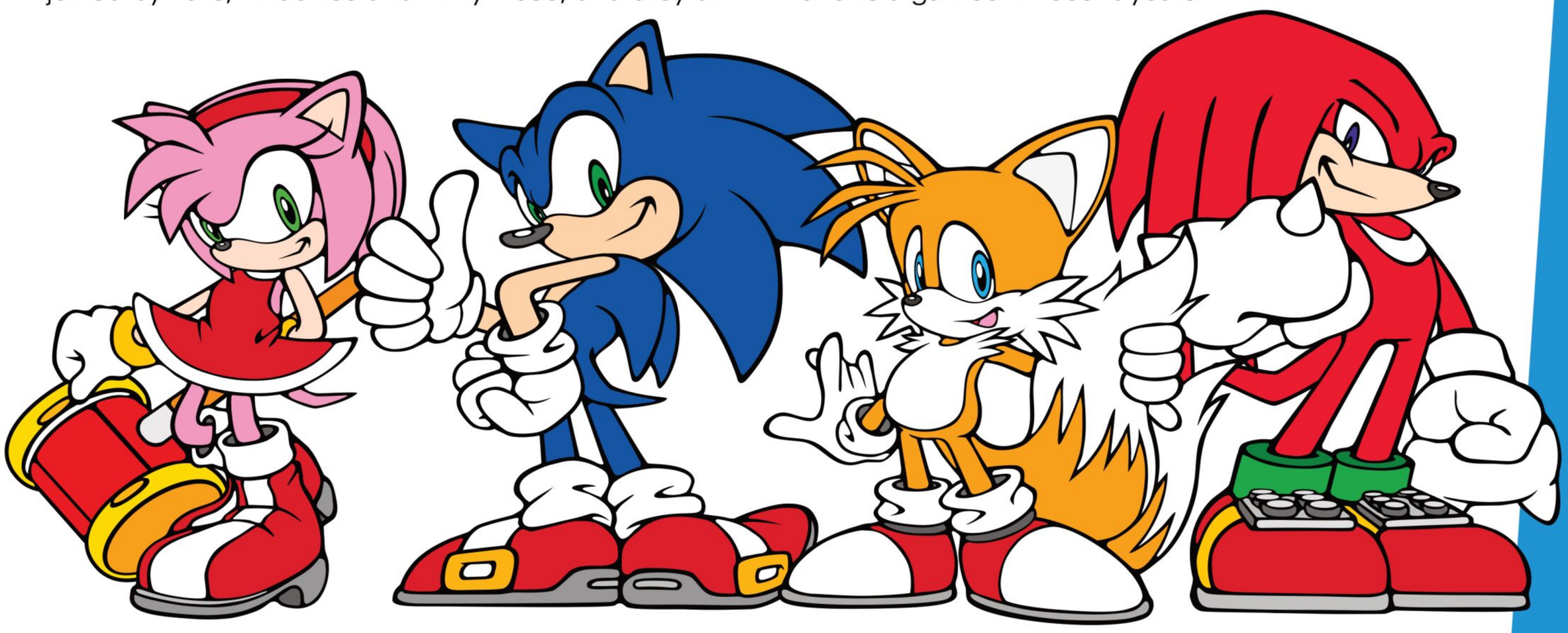
Launched exactly ten years after the first game, *Sonic Adventure 2* would be the blue blur's last outing on a Sega console. Reprising the platform, shooting and item-hunting gameplay styles from *Sonic Adventure*, the game allowed you to play as either the heroic trio of Sonic, Tails and Knuckles or the dark side, consisting of Robotnik and the newcomers Shadow and Rouge. It's a big graphical upgrade over its predecessor and the platforming stages are improved, but the item-hunting stages feel like a bit of a step back. The game is particularly popular with younger fans who discovered Sonic on the GameCube and came to love its slightly darker story themes.



SONIC ADVANCE

GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2001

The first *Sonic* game to be developed primarily for a Nintendo console is a pretty straightforward 2D platformer that is much like the Mega Drive games, right down to the ability to have Tails follow Sonic with a handy cheat code. In terms of mechanics, grind rails are the main new addition to *Sonic Advance*, which have been carried over from *Sonic Adventure 2*. While Sonic obviously features as a playable character, he's also joined by Tails, Knuckles and Amy Rose, and they all play differently to each other as you'd expect, which greatly expands the game's 12 levels. The minigame Tiny Chao Garden lets you raise Chao and send them to the GameCube *Sonic Adventure* games, and there's also a multiplayer mode if you can find three friends with the game. *Sonic Advance* also marks the first involvement of Dimps, the development team responsible for most of Sonic's new 2D and handheld games in recent years.



» [GameCube] Control a team of three characters, switching between them to accomplish different tasks.

SONIC HEROES

VARIOUS, 2003

***Sonic Heroes* is quite a notable release, as it's one of the first games to highlight that the Sonic franchise was far from bulletproof.** The idea of controlling teams that specialise in speed, power and flight is solid, and the game ditches Dreamcast-era inclusions such as Chao-raising and includes special stages inspired by the Mega Drive games. They're all fine mechanics and suggest a return to the good old days. That nostalgia was further heightened in the UK by a clever marketing campaign that used *The A-Team* theme to really drive home that Sonic was back. However, technical issues such as an extremely poor camera really mar the experience, with the PS2 version of the game suffering the worst due to additional glitches and a much lower framerate (which certainly isn't something you want in a game that focuses on speed). The 12 characters also highlighted the abundance being introduced to the series at that point.

SONIC RUSH

DS, 2005

Mario and Sonic have always been rivals and their careers took interesting paths during the early Noughties. Nintendo's plumber was doing incredibly well in the 3D platform space, but hadn't had any new 2D adventures for years. On the other hand, Sonic struggled with the crossover to 3D, but he was flourishing in 2D – after a few years of dodgy spin-offs and main series missteps. *Sonic Rush* is a perfect example of that success and it remains our favourite of the two *Rush* titles available on Nintendo's handheld. Having refined a heavily speed-focused style of 2D platforming on the Game Boy Advance, Dimps placed that action into new tall stages that took place across both screens of the DS, with Sonic now able to charge through enemies at top speed with the new boost move – just as long as he could maintain a combo. It works brilliantly and manages to capture Sonic's speedy essence in a way that often eludes the 3D games.

SONIC RIDERS

VARIOUS, 2006

The third distinct racing spin-off branch of the *Sonic* series puts Sonic and chums on hoverboards to face off against the Babylon Rogues – a gang of thieves consisting of Jet The Hawk, Wave The Swallow and Storm The Albatross. The animated intro is excellent, and characters are able to use different shortcuts based on their own attributes, which is a nice idea, but the game is tricky to get to grips with. Two sequels followed: *Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity* and *Sonic Free Riders*.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

PS3/XBOX 360, 2006

This 15th-anniversary game is an unfortunate low point in the series. Sonic continues the 3D platforming style of *Sonic Adventure*, Shadow gets the gunplay and vehicle usage of his own spin-off game, and new boy Silver is a slow character who uses telekinesis to manipulate objects. Even if the game didn't feature an ill-advised romance between Sonic and the human princess Elise, its technical problems are so numerous and severe as to strip away any fun the game may have been able to offer.

SONIC RIVALS

PSP, 2006

Developed by Backbone Entertainment, Sonic's PSP debut used the graphical power of Sony's handheld to deliver some nice 3D environments, albeit ones designed to host the classic 2D platforming template. The twist to this game is that it's a competitive endeavour, pitting Sonic, Knuckles, Shadow and Silver against each other in one-on-one races, with offensive and defensive power-ups to match. It's reasonably fun, but the level design isn't up there with the series' best. *Sonic Rivals 2* followed in 2007, again for PSP.

» Sonic's new accomplice in *Secret Rings* is a helpful genie called Shahra.

SONIC AND THE SECRET RINGS

WII, 2007

The first game in Sonic's short-lived storybook spin-off series sees him transported to the world of Arabian Nights, with regulars like Knuckles and Tails playing roles such as Sinbad and Ali Baba. This platformer has an unusual on-rails style that manages to avoid the camera issues common to prior 3D *Sonic* games (at the cost of curtailing freedom) and implements an interesting but ultimately flawed upgrade system. The game did receive a sequel, *Sonic & The Black Knight*, which was based on Arthurian legends.

MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

WII/DS, 2007

After years of rivalry, Sonic finally appeared in a game with Mario – and they decided to get all of their mates together in the spirit of friendly Olympic competition. It's a pretty good party game featuring the usual array of track and field events, and it sold millions despite most Wii owners already having *Wii Sports*. The series has continued, with summer and winter versions to accompany every competition except 2018.

SONIC CHRONICLES: THE DARK BROTHERHOOD

DS, 2008

Plot has never been a particularly strong suit for the *Sonic* series, so the announcement of a RPG starring Sonic was something of a surprise – but bigger still was the surprise that BioWare was to develop it. The young potential audience required a lightweight story and easy progress, but the RPG specialists delivered a decent experience in spite of these shortcomings. This game didn't get a sequel, most likely due to EA's acquisition of BioWare, so it ends on a cliffhanger that isn't likely to be resolved.

» [PS3] *Sonic Unleashed* transitions between side-scrolling and third-person gameplay styles.

SONIC UNLEASHED

VARIOUS, 2008

Sonic needed a new direction, and *Sonic Unleashed* was the result. The new platforming template adopted the boost mechanic from *Sonic Rush* but transitioned between 2D sections and high-speed 3D ones. Combined with some of the best graphics the series has ever had, the game was capable of delivering some truly thrilling moments, even with some wonky controls and the abundance of bottomless pits. Things slowed down considerably due to an item-based progression system and the night-time stages starring the Werehog, a monstrous form of Sonic whose stretchy limbs were used for repetitive 3D beat-'em-up sections. Its best bits are thrilling, but it's too uneven to achieve classic status.

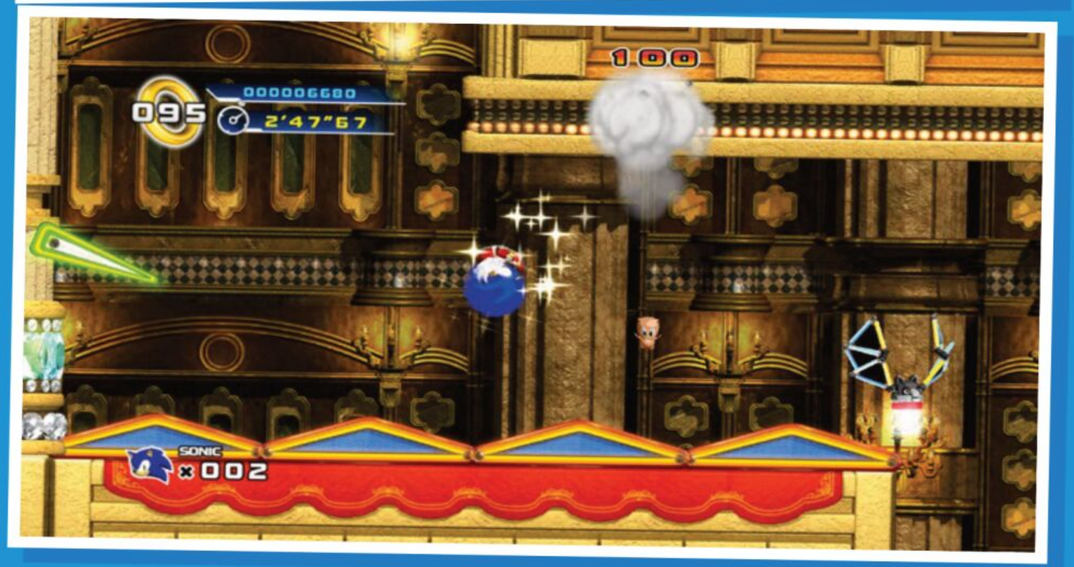
NIGHT AND DAY

How the HD versions differ from the Wii and PS2 offerings

There are two distinct versions of *Sonic Unleashed* – the primary version, released for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, and a somewhat cut-down version created for the Wii and PS2. Both of them tell the same story and feature the same gameplay styles, but there are a number of key differences between them. The HD versions have full 3D town environments to explore between action stages, and require you to collect sun and moon medals to unlock additional stages. Additionally, an experience system allows you to level up Sonic in both his regular form and the Werehog.

By contrast, the Wii and PS2 versions lose the 3D hub worlds, with all of the inter-stage action taking place through menus and static backgrounds. The daytime stages all have different designs compared to the HD versions, and there are fewer locations to visit due to the omission of Empire City and Mazuri. These versions are very heavy on the night-time stages, with over three quarters of the game played as the Werehog, and if you're playing the Wii version you'll also have motion controls added to the experience. The game also loses the minigame set in Tails' Tornado plane, and the level-up system has been simplified and only used by the Werehog.

The Wii and PS2 versions were actually slightly better received by reviewers at the time, but we still prefer the HD versions. The best way to play the HD version today is via backwards compatibility on the Xbox Series X/S, as the game hits its 30 frames per second target much more consistently than on original Xbox 360 and PS3 hardware.



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 4: EPISODE I

VARIOUS, 2010

Designed to appeal to long-time fans of Sonic's classic Mega Drive outings, this is a 2D platformer that revisits old level archetypes. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite manage to live up to the quality of the games that inspired it. *Sonic The Hedgehog 4: Episode I* features derivative level designs that veer into tribute act territory, and Sonic's physics are bizarre and somewhat broken. *Episode II*, released in 2012, resolved some of the problems seen in the first episode, and reintroduced Tails with some new co-operative moves.

SONIC COLOURS

WII/DS, 2010

Set in an interstellar theme park, *Sonic Colours* tasks Sonic with rescuing Wisps – aliens that are being used as a power source by Eggman. The game utilises the hybrid 2D/3D platforming template introduced in *Sonic Unleashed*, with Sonic gaining new powers when he collects the Wisps, from rocket boosting to drilling through the ground. These abilities enabled all kinds of new level designs, making for one of Sonic's best 3D outings to date. It's also one of the most graphically impressive games on the Wii.

SONIC GENERATIONS

VARIOUS, 2011

For the series' 20th anniversary, Sonic Team devised a time travel plot that sees the shorter, pudgier Sonic of 1991 meeting his modern counterpart and taking on stages from the history of the series. Classic Sonic's stages are all 2D designs, while modern Sonic refines the *Unleashed*/*Colours* platforming template. Re-imagined versions of stages like Green Hill Zone and Chemical Plant Zone are thrilling to speed through as modern Sonic, and even the less fondly remembered games inspire good stages, such as Crisis City. The game is quite short and a couple of the boss battles are weak, but it's a fitting celebration of the series and a rather good platform game overall.

» [3DS] Modern Sonic's stages are still 2D designs, but occasionally have a slight 3D visual slant.

GENERATIONS APART

Double dipping with the 3DS version of *Sonic Generations*

Home console owners didn't get all the anniversary fun, as *Sonic Generations* also put in a handheld appearance on Nintendo's then-new 3DS – and it was an entirely different game to the other versions, developed by Dimps. Though you still play as both classic and modern versions of Sonic, modern Sonic's gameplay is more akin to a 2.5D version of the likes of *Sonic Rush* than his 3D gameplay in the home console game, and classic Sonic can learn the homing attack.

Although the game starts with Green Hill Zone, the rest of the stages represent alternative selections from past games. That means you get to play through new versions of Casino Night Zone, Mushroom Hill Zone, Emerald Coast and more – Dimps even represents the handheld history of the series with the inclusion of Water Palace from *Sonic Rush*. A few of the boss battles are also unique to this version, taking in highlights such as *Sonic 3*'s Big Arms boss and the Biolizard. The other major difference to note is that the 3DS version of *Sonic Generations* has special stages that the home console version didn't include. These are based on the tubular stages first introduced in *Sonic Heroes*, and just as they did in that game, they serve as a way for you to obtain the Chaos Emeralds in *Sonic Generations*.

While it isn't quite as flashy as the home version, as you'd probably expect, *Sonic Generations* is a good time on the 3DS – it looks good, plays well and has a top-notch soundtrack you should go out of your way to hear.

SONIC & ALL-STARS RACING TRANSFORMED

VARIOUS, 2012

Building on its 2009 racer *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*, developer Sumo Digital introduced vehicles that can transform to race on land, sea and air, as well as racetracks that could change from lap to lap. With an excellent handling model, balanced weapons and a deep and challenging single-player mode, it's one of the best kart racers ever. But it's more than just that — it's practically a love letter to classic Sega fans, with representation for rarely seen games like *Skies Of Arcadia* and *Burning Rangers*.

SONIC DASH

IOS/ANDROID, 2013

This endless runner by Sega's Hardlight team is one of Sonic's most prominent mobile exclusives. Adapting *Sonic*'s gameplay to the template established by the likes of *Temple Run*, your goal is to keep Sonic running into the screen while leaping over or sliding under obstacles, defeating enemies, fending off attacks from Eggman, and collecting rings. The game remains very popular and has hosted collaborations with *Pac-Man* and *Angry Birds* over the years, and has spawned sequels based on *Sonic Boom* and *Sonic Forces*.

SONIC LOST WORLD

VARIOUS, 2013

This 3D platformer takes place across cylindrical stages and the control system has been totally changed, with Sonic's default speed slowed to the point that a run button has been added. It's a beautiful game, bringing the bold colours and simple shapes of the Mega Drive era into 3D with a minimum of modernisation, but it's hard to establish a rhythm and the game is prone to massive difficulty spikes. Sonic Team's attempt to innovate was commendable, but it didn't quite pay off as hoped.

SONIC BOOM: RISE OF LYRIC

WII U, 2014

This game was always going to be fighting an uphill battle after the negative reception fans gave to its redesigned characters, but the finished product didn't really help itself. The game was developed by Big Red Button and tried to move the series from straight platforming to a more action-adventure style. Sadly, the game was beset by technical problems including an infinite jump glitch with Knuckles, and suffered from dull, repetitive stages. It is generally regarded as being one of the weakest games in the series.

SONIC RUNNERS

IOS/ANDROID, 2015

This mobile endless runner is unlike the *Sonic Dash* games in that it utilises the traditional 2D viewpoint of the Mega Drive games. You could play as a wide variety of characters from across the series and take part in both a regular story and themed contests, such as a Halloween event. Despite being downloaded over 5 million times, *Sonic Runners* didn't meet Sega's financial goals and its servers were shut down in July 2016, just 13 months after the game's official launch.

SONIC BOOM: FIRE & ICE

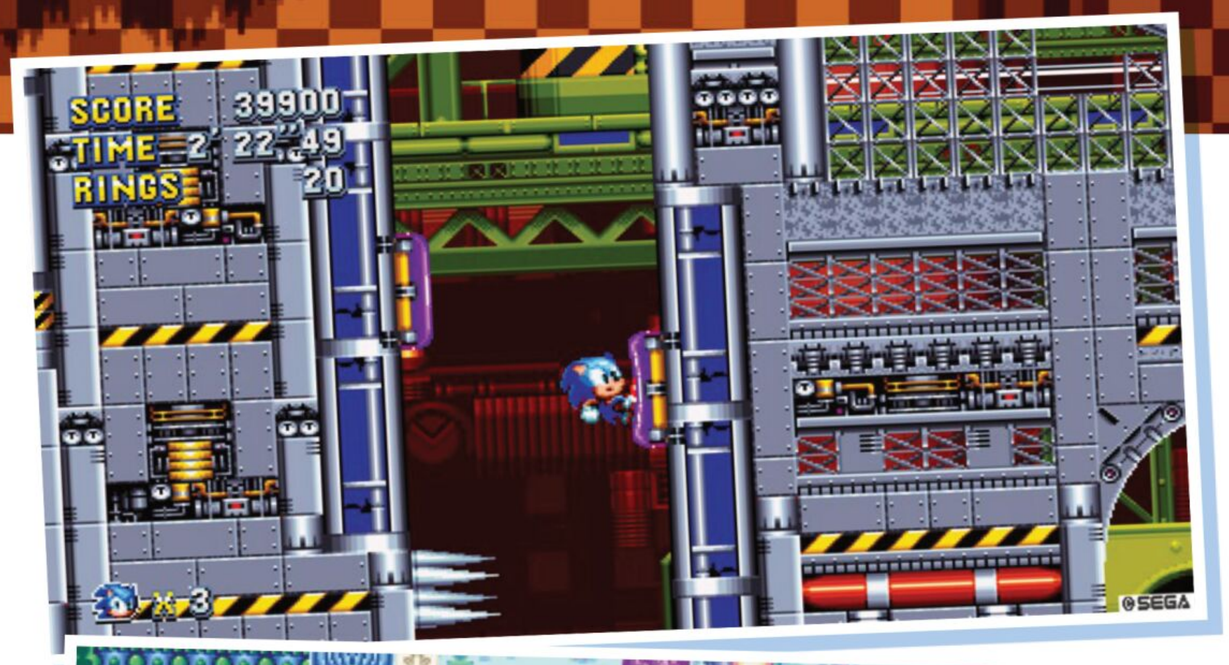
3DS, 2016

Sanzaru Games had previously developed *Sonic Boom: Shattered Crystal* for 3DS, and this sequel built on that template. Each of the four characters – Sonic, Tails, Knuckles and Amy – has their own unique abilities that are required to make progress, while the fire and ice of the title are used to augment character abilities and solve environmental puzzles. It's a decent side-scroller and easily the best of the three *Sonic Boom* games, but the character-swapping gameplay always felt like a slightly odd fit for the series.

SONIC MANIA

VARIOUS, 2017

The most recent attempt to bring classic 2D *Sonic* gameplay into the present day was an unusual development, as Sega collaborated with fans of the series to make the game – most notably Christian Whitehead and Simon Thomley, who had created well-received mobile ports of earlier *Sonic* games. *Sonic Mania* features Sonic, Tails and Knuckles traversing remixed versions of classic stages as well as some all-new stages such as Studiopolis Zone and Press Garden Zone. The game is an absolute triumph, with pixel art that evokes the Mega Drive era while going beyond what Sega's 16-bit console could do and an abundance of clever touches, like the way fire shields can burn wooden bridges. The classic Blue Spheres bonus stage returns alongside a new 3D special stage that builds on the concept of *Sonic CD*'s version of the stage, and the game is stuffed with awesome throwbacks for long-term fans. If you've ever loved Sonic, this one's for you.



ENCORE! ENCORE!

What does the *Sonic Mania Plus* DLC add?

Sonic Mania was originally released exclusively as a downloadable game, but there was strong interest in a physical release from both fans and Sega staff. Feeling that a bit more content was needed to justify the higher price associated with a physical copy, the team reworked the game to add it and *Sonic Mania Plus* was released at retail and as DLC for existing digital copies on July 2018, 11 months after the original release.

The key feature is the addition of two characters, Mighty and Ray – both of whom originally appeared in *SegaSonic The Hedgehog* back in 1993. Mighty has a ground-slam attack and a hard shell that protects him from spikes while rolling, while Ray can glide in a fashion that brings to mind the cape power-up from *Super Mario World*. Both of them can take part in the original Mania mode or the new Encore mode, which includes remixed stages and lets various combinations of characters team up. However, when a character is killed they'll be replaced and won't be available until you win them back from the newly introduced pinball bonus stage. Additionally, the competition mode was expanded to allow for four-player action.

Existing owners of *Sonic Mania* also benefited from an update to the game around this time. The main Mania mode gained additional small cutscenes between stages to tell a more cohesive story, and the Metal Sonic boss fight was updated to include a new section featuring the giant version from *Knuckles' Chaotix*.

WAIT! ISN'T THAT...?

How *Sonic Mania* employs scrapped content from earlier *Sonic* games

GOGGLES

■ When Sonic pilots the Tornado, you can see him wearing goggles. These were scrapped from the original *Sonic The Hedgehog*, and fans believe they were meant for use in underwater areas to help Sonic breathe.

JUMP POSE

■ In early prototypes of *Sonic The Hedgehog*, jumping after you'd passed the stage-end post could cause Sonic to leap into the air with his fist raised triumphantly. His act clear animation here is adapted from that.

SPLATS

■ This bad bunny was scrapped from *Sonic The Hedgehog* but still managed to appear on early merchandise. It finally gets to make its debt as an enemy in the brand-new Press Garden Zone stage.

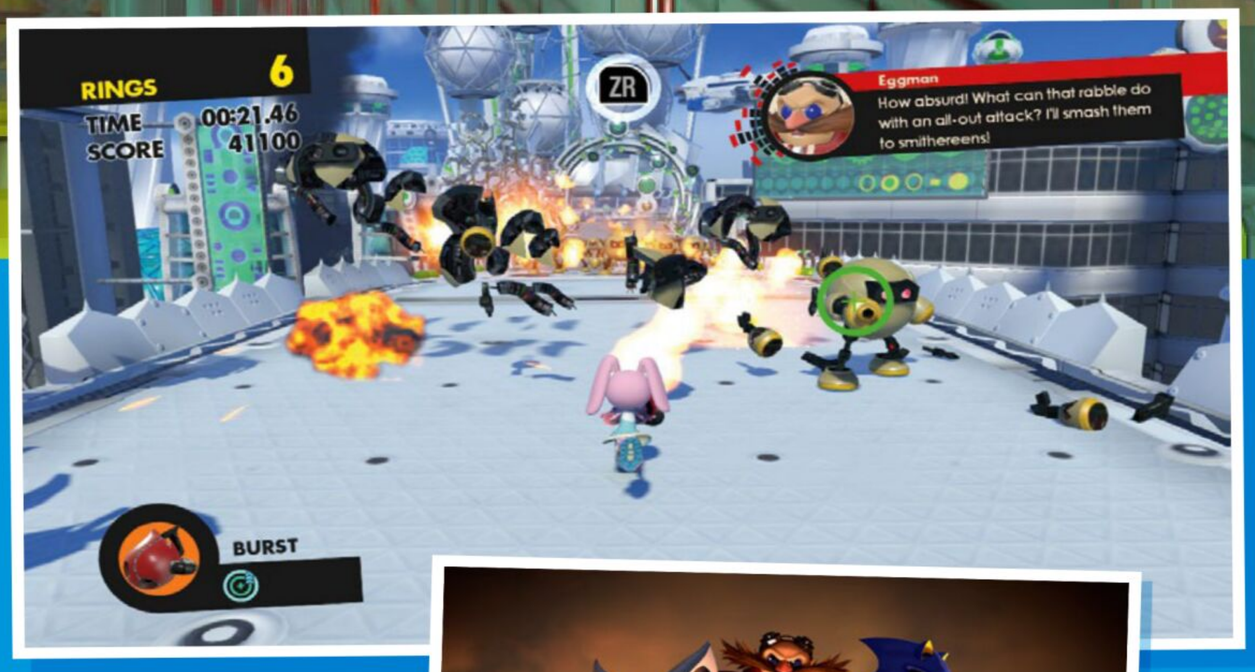
MIRAGE SALOON

■ This brand-new desert stage combines elements of an unused desert stage from a *Sonic 2* mock-up screenshot shown in an advert and the scrapped Desert Dazzle stage from the 2011 *Sonic CD* remaster.

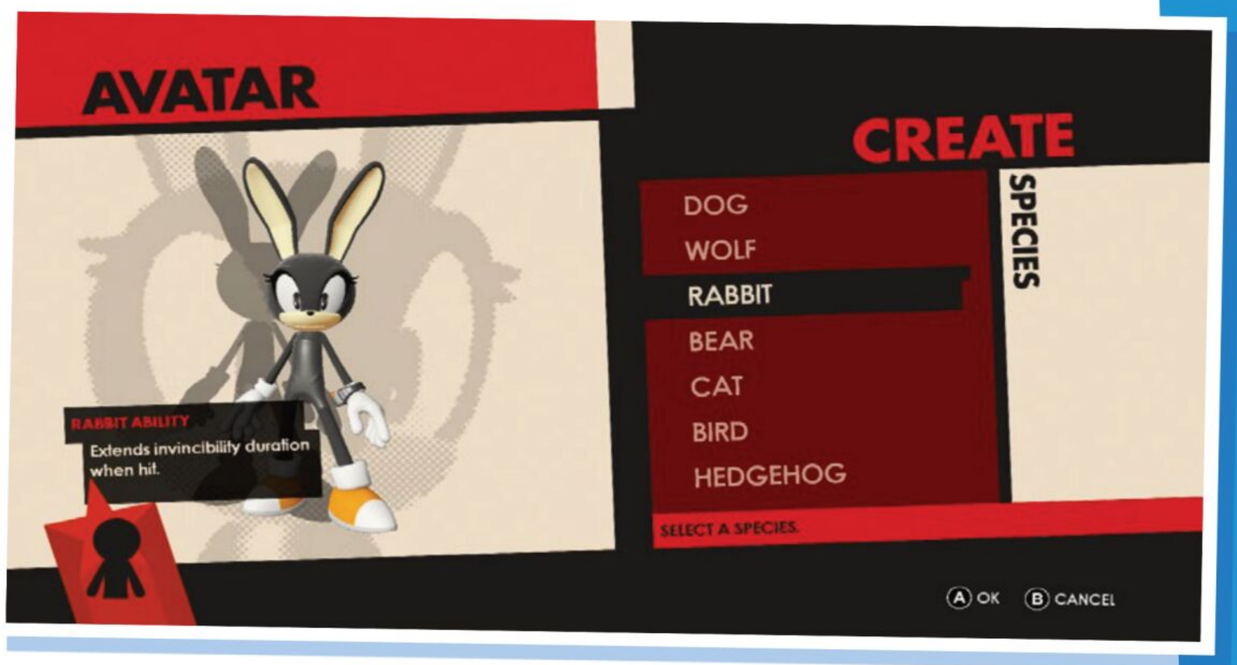
SONIC FORCES

VARIOUS, 2017

Eggman's back, and he's not alone – past foes Chaos, Zavok and Metal Sonic are here too, along with new villain Infinite. That combined force is enough for Eggman to take over the world, and even Sonic is captured. But with the help of classic Sonic and a new member of the resistance that you create yourself, you can start to turn the tide. Much of the gameplay in *Sonic Forces* is patterned after *Sonic Generations*, but the game doesn't live up to that standard – the controls can feel quite iffy and stages are short and easy, while Sonic's quips and jokes feel like an odd fit for the plot's attempted seriousness.



» [Switch] Take back the world from the Eggman Empire with your own custom character.



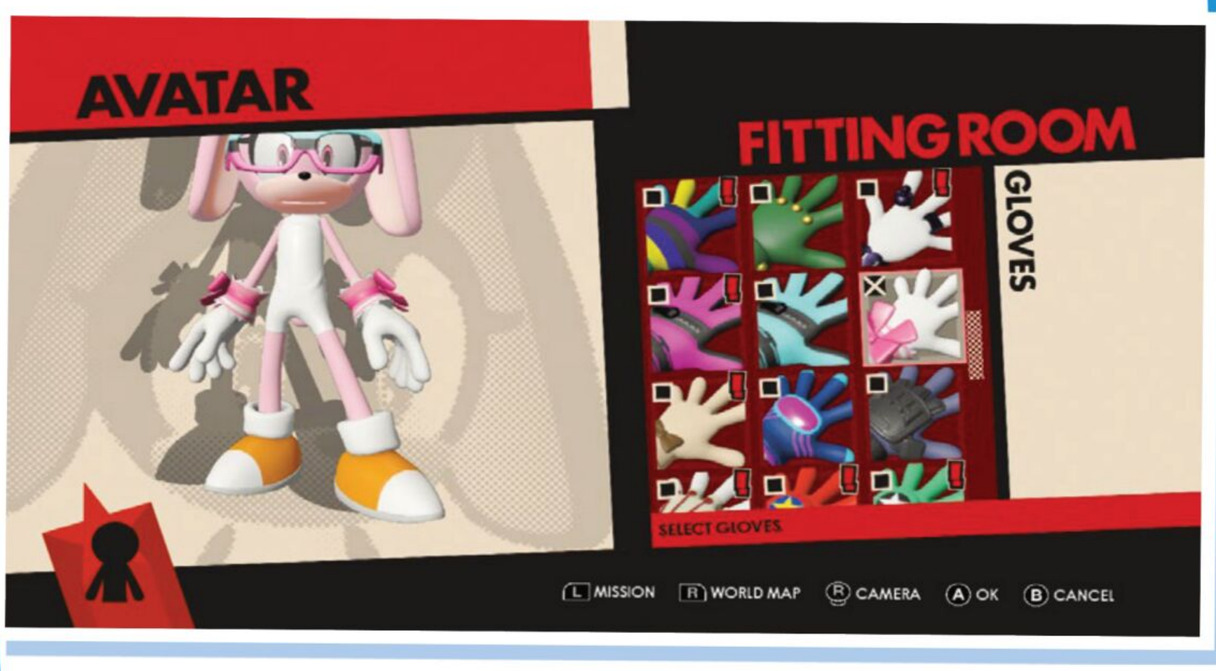
SEARCH FOR THE HERO INSIDE YOURSELF

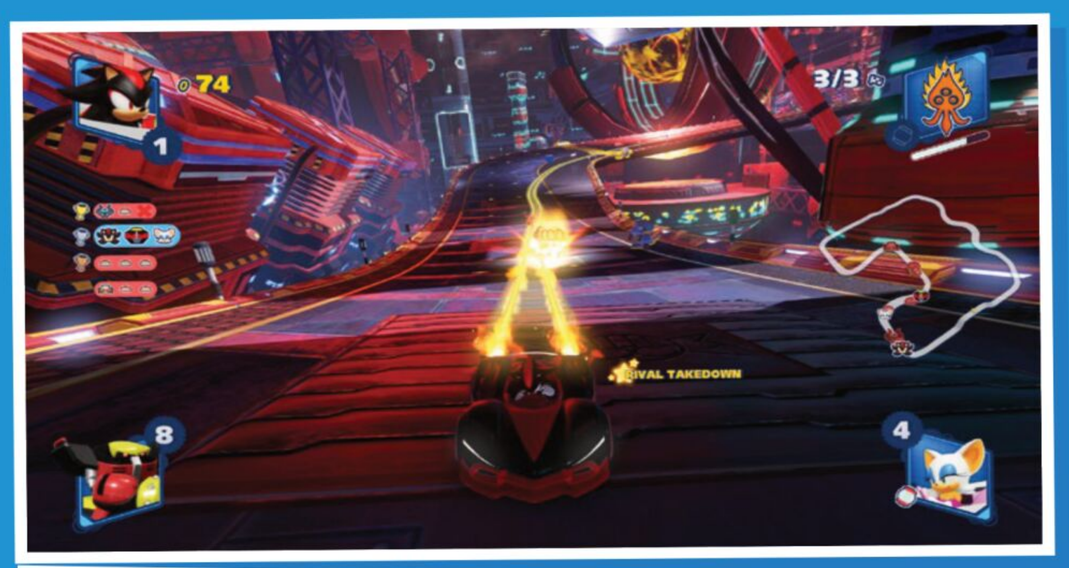
How character creation lets you join Sonic's universe

Sonic's had plenty of friends over the years, but that hasn't stopped the fan community adding their own creations to the ranks, and Sega finally allowed players to bring their DeviantArt dreams to life in *Sonic Forces*. In fact, the character creation is arguably the best bit of the game, as you get quite a lot of freedom to design Sonic's newest friend, and they play a key role in the game's plot.

Avatar characters can be one of seven species – dog, cat, bird, rabbit, wolf, bear or hedgehog – each with their own unique gameplay perks, such as prolonged invincibility after being hit. From there you can choose all sorts of different fur colours, facial types and even a few different voices for your creation. Once that's done, you'll have the opportunity to pick out some clothes, which you'll unlock at a terrific rate by taking on the various missions in the main game.

The other thing you get to do with your new character is equip them with a Wispon, which is a handy kind of gadget that lets the avatar use Wisp powers. These are quite diverse in their functions – for example, the Burst Wispon lets you shoot a powerful flame jet and use explosions to propel yourself through the air, while the Drill Wispon can drill through enemies and also tunnel through the ground. There's no single best option, so it's fun to experiment and find out which one best fits your play style.



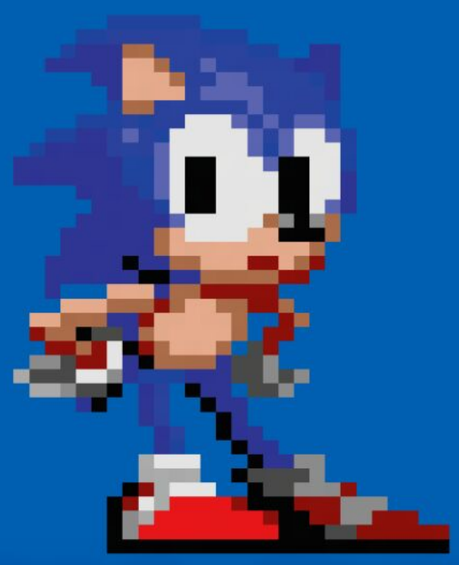


TEAM SONIC RACING

VARIOUS, 2019

Sumo Digital stripped things back to basics for its third racing game with Sonic, ditching the planes, boats and wider Sega cast. In their place they added new team mechanics that allow allied racers to share items and give each other boosts to achieve collective victory. It's a very enjoyable game and perhaps the only kart racer in which co-operating is more fun than competing, especially in local multiplayer, but it's best enjoyed by players who missed Sonic's previous racers, as quite a few tracks are reused.

retro GAMER



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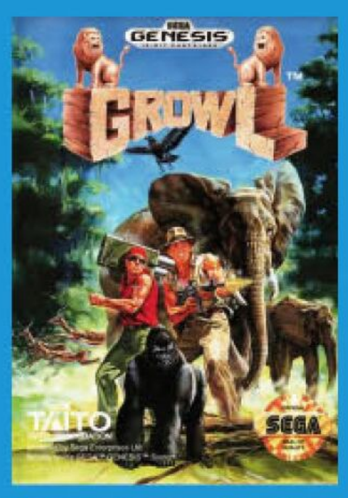

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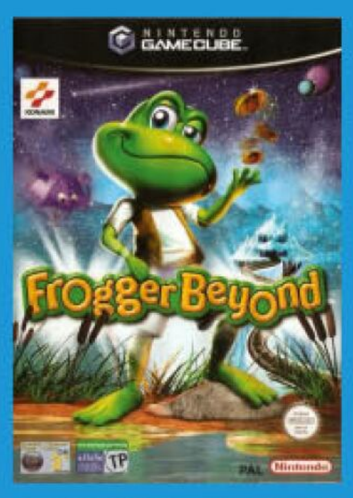

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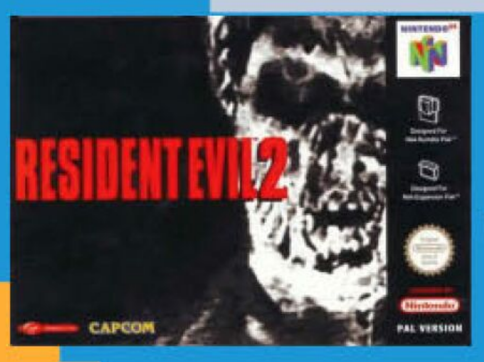

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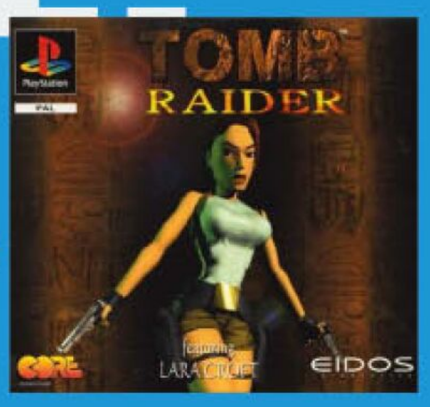

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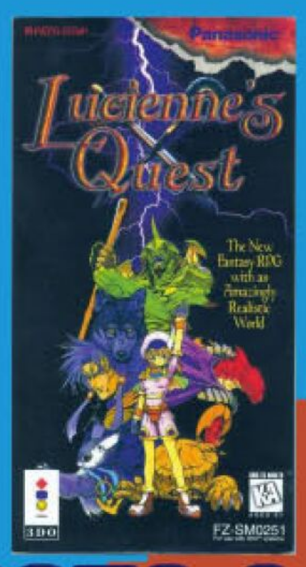

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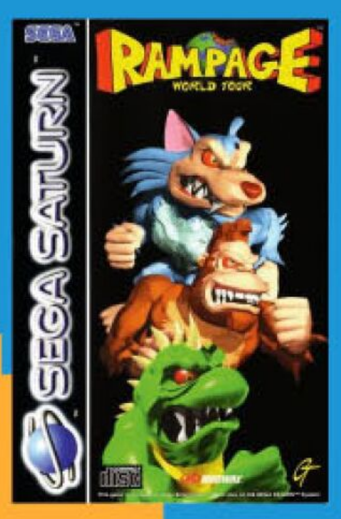

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